

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Melchior Hand Coghill. THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT ON THE SENSE OF BELONGING AND ENGAGEMENT OF MILITARY LEARNERS ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS. (Under the direction of Dr. David Siegel). Department of Educational Leadership, November 2017.

Afforded by access to G.I. Bill educational benefits, high numbers of military learners are enrolling on college campuses. The influx of military learners brings distinctive challenges to the college campus. Challenged by this growing population of students, higher education leaders are prompted to expand and promote institutional policies, processes, and support programs to support the academic success of military learners.

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of academic employment on the perceived sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners. Military learners share many characteristics with other marginalized student groups, including those of, first generation, minority, and lower socioeconomic status. They do, however, possess distinctive academic and social needs that differ in comparison to their non-military undergraduate peers, including, strong cultural identities, difficulty transitioning to the civilian campus, lower levels of socialization, and lower levels of faculty, peer, and campus engagement practices. As a result, military learners may not benefit from traditional points of engagement and support programming.

This study was guided by Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging and sought to extend the model to military learners engaged in academic employment. Data were gathered from 13 military learners who participated in focus group sessions held spring 2017. Research participants were military learners employed as tutors at a centralized learning center at a four-year public institution in the Southeast.

The data revealed that academic employment positively impacted the sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners employed as tutors. The research study found that military learners perceived academic employment to be instrumental to their establishment of sense of belonging, and academic employment amplified their engagement practices with peers and the campus community. Further, the study substantiates the relationship between sense of belonging, engagement, and academic employment.

Results from the study suggest implications and recommendations for higher education leadership to understand, address, and support the specific needs of military learners. Study findings contribute to the literature on military learner success, engagement, and sense of belonging. Further investigations are recommended regarding the intersection of academic employment, sense of belonging, and engagement practices on the college campus.

THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT ON THE SENSE OF BELONGING
AND ENGAGEMENT OF MILITARY LEARNERS ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS

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by

Elizabeth Melchior Hand Coghill

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AND ENGAGEMENT OF MILITARY LEARNERS ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad,

Betty and John Melchior

*And he shall be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season
and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. Psalm 1:3*

You raised me to value education for the journey, not for the worldly trappings education might bring. You showed me that the educational process itself was to be truly valued and is worthy of pursuit. You exemplified persistence and hard work, and instilled in me a foundation from which I could prosper and succeed.

You are both an example of what an educator should aspire to become. It is not a surprise that I would find my professional career in higher education. I am a child raised in a family of educators. Your journey as first generation college students of immigrant parents from Germany and Ireland is my legacy. Our family roots, Melchior and Boyle, placed education as a lynch pin of the American dream and of success. Your pursuit of education degrees and years serving as a teacher and school system administrator in the New Jersey school system are my example. My educational roots play an important role in who I am and what I value, and I hope that I have passed that legacy on to my children and grandchildren.

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In everything give thanks. 1 Thessalonians 5:18

No one arrives at this destination alone. I have received help and guidance along the journey. There are many who have extended love, friendship, and wise counsel to me and I will forever be thankful for your kindness and support.

To my source of all strength:

I give praise and thanksgiving to God and my Savior Jesus Christ. For holding me close when life is difficult, sustaining me when I need to overcome obstacles, and lovingly guiding my way. May you be pleased with my devotion and praise to you.

To my husband, Jeff:

There is no doubt that I would not have pursued this opportunity if it wasn't for your love and support. You have been unwavering with your encouragement and have been my greatest cheerleader. You have dealt with a "stressed out wife," and never complained that there were no groceries (well maybe a few times). In the first years of the program you made sure Nathan was at Scouts and was always willing to buy Chinese for dinner on the nights I was in class. You always had the wine glass at the ready when class nights were exhausting, and listened, listened again, and listened yet some more when life's challenges threatened to get the best of me. You made it so I could pursue this goal, achieve it and succeed. You understood every time I spent the weekend in the office to meet a writing deadline. I spent a lot of weekends in the office! Thank you for loving and supporting me through this journey. I am blessed to have you as my teammate in life. *The best is yet to come!*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For 71 years, the G.I. Bill has enabled military veterans to attend post-secondary institutions, and its impact is still evident in contemporary U.S. higher education. The G.I. Bill legacy is one of increased educational access for underrepresented societal groups that without its educational benefits would diminish their enrollment in higher education. Two-year and four-year college campuses can expect an estimated two million military learners to utilize federal Veteran Administration educational benefits and enroll in post-secondary institutions before 2020 (Jones, 2013). Growing numbers of military learners prompt higher education to initiate new policies and programs designed to promote beneficial campus environments that meet the specific demands of these students (Kirchner, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

With the passage of the Post 9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008 legislation and expected reduction of the U.S. Armed Forces, high numbers of military learners will continue to enroll on American college campuses and challenge post-secondary institutional leaders (Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Confronted by the unique needs of this growing student population, higher education leaders are called upon to deepen their understanding of the needs of these students as well as implement institutional processes and support measures that increase the likelihood of their persistence and successful degree attainment (Cole & Kim, 2013; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Vacchi, 2012).

The Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill became law on June 20, 2008 and its expanded legislation enables the two million service members who served in Iraq and Afghanistan the opportunity to receive educational benefits to attend post-secondary education programs (Dortch, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2001; McBain et al., 2012). Vacchi (2012) highlighted

the improved benefits included under the Post 9/11 G. I. Bill legislation and observed the improvements as responsible for increased numbers of military learners enrolling in post-secondary education. Griffin and Gilbert (2012) also maintain that the expansion measures in contemporary G.I. Bill benefits prompted a significant growth in military learners on the college campus, and provided the opportunity for both honorably and service related disability discharged service members to attend college.

The legacy of increased access and educational attainment continues, with record numbers of military learners using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits (McCaslin, Thiede, Vinatieri, Passi, Lyon, & Ahern, 2014). In 2012, nearly one million veterans and military service members enrolled in post-secondary degree programs using Veterans Administration benefits (McCaslin et al., 2014). According to the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report (2013), between the years of 2009 and 2013 an estimated 1,143,105 veterans attended post-secondary institutions in the United States. The Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership organization reported that military learners total 5% of all U.S. post-secondary students (McCaslin et al., 2014). As military student enrollments increase, so does the demand for policies, services and support programs designed to better address their needs (McCaslin et al., 2014)

Background of Problem

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill allows for increased access to military learners who are first-generation, minority, and lower socioeconomic groups as well as their dependents (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The influx of these students brings distinctive challenges to the college campus. Many military learners express difficulty with policies on campus, including transferring coursework, maintaining educational benefits, and progression into their major programs of

study (Kim & Cole, 2013; McBain et al., 2012; McCaslin et al., 2014). When compared to traditionally aged students, the military learners bring unique characteristics, including high levels of mental and physical health challenges, difficulty transitioning to a civilian campus, problematic social connections with peers, and lower levels of faculty engagement (Kim & Cole, 2013; McBain et al., 2012; McCaslin et al., 2014).

McBain et al. (2012) questioned the preparedness of higher education to serve the needs of the increasing number of students using Post 9/11 G.I. Bill benefits on their campuses. Furthermore, McBain et al. (2012) affirmed that student enrollment of military learners in post-secondary institutions is expected to increase as a result of contemporary G.I. Bill educational benefits. Although campuses are working to provide increased services for military learners, higher education professionals lack the information and understanding of the unique needs of these students (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).

Statement of Problem

Military learners possess academic and social needs that differ in comparison to their non-military undergraduate peers. As a result, these students may not benefit from traditional points of engagement to support their academic and social success (Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain et al., 2012). In their study on the academic success of military learners, Burnett and Segoria (2009) observed that in order to achieve academic success, military learners must engage in a transition of cultures. Military learners must transcend a culture gap between military life and academic life that operates as a barrier to their academic success (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). According to the 2013 Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, military learners enter higher education with “a unique life experience and perspective shaped by their military service” (APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, 2013,

p. 3). Green and Van Dusen (2012) acknowledged the rising numbers of military learners as a catalyst for higher education leadership to comprehend their unique needs and work to determine how to best serve and support these students.

In a 2013 analysis report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Cole and Kim (2013) summarized the many challenges faced by military learners on the college campus. The NSSE survey results revealed that military learners experience lower levels of campus engagement and are selective about how to spend their time outside of the classroom (Cole & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, military learners are more likely to be non-traditional in age, more likely to be first-generation college students, and often report high levels of outside responsibilities they must balance with college work (Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain et al., 2012). The analysis of NSSE survey data and relevant research revealed several characteristics commonly shared by military learners. Military learners are more likely to isolate themselves on campus and struggle to make connections with nonmilitary campus peers (Cole & Kim, 2013; Kirchner, 2015). These students approach degree programs with high levels of seriousness and view education as a primary means to employment, yet lack necessary civilian workforce readiness skills (Cole & Kim, 2013). Active duty and veteran students are more likely to balance academic and off-campus responsibilities like employment and family than nonmilitary peers (Kirchner, 2015). Military learners are less likely to engage with faculty members in and outside of the classroom, and are less likely to work with other students on class projects and assignments (Cole & Kim, 2013; Kirchner, 2015). Military learners are less engaged in high-impact involvement such as academic employment, student organizations, internships, study abroad, and community service (Cole & Kim, 2013).

Qualitative research studies conducted by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), Jones (2013), and Griffin and Gilbert (2012), reported military learners frequently manifest feelings of isolation from peers and faculty while attending post-secondary institutions. As a result of prior military experiences, military learners have difficulty making social connections, often struggle to transition from military life to the academic environment, and often evade peer interactions in and out of the classroom (APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, 2013; Kirchner, 2015).

Support services can greatly enhance the opportunity for military learners to achieve academic success and campus engagement (Kirchner, 2015). Higher education leadership is challenged to design and implement support policies and services that create accommodating campus environments in which military learners can be academically successful (Green & Van Dusen, 2012). Despite early attempts to create beneficial campus settings, the retention and completion rates of military learners remain a campus concern (McBain et al., 2012). In a 2014 American Council on Education Report, McBain et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of campus administrative programs and structures designed to respond to the needs of military learners. These supports include dedicated offices for military learners, establishment of new programs and services designed to meet student needs, educating faculty and staff to better understand the challenges experienced by military learners, and tailoring common services (McBain et al., 2012). In addition, McBain et al. (2012) advocated for four institutional initiatives that support military learners: (1) noting the importance of military learners in campus strategic plans, (2) recognizing prior military service in transfer credits, (3) meeting the demand for specific counseling services such as those for students with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and (4) expanding accommodations for active duty involved in deployment or military training. In the same report, the authors included three primary recommendations for institutional

improvements: establishing transition assistance to guide military to civilian campus adjustments, fostering improved socialization and campus engagement programming, and providing professional development for faculty and staff to increase needs awareness (McBain et al., 2012).

In the case of military learners, little research has been published beyond the scope of military friendly streamlining of administrative processes and advocating for services designed to ease their collegiate transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). Educational outcomes research has shown the adoption of military friendly processes has improved conditions and positively impacted academic success (Cole & Kim, 2013). Despite this research, there remains a gap in our understanding of the unique academic and social challenges facing military learners on the post-secondary campus.

Purpose of Study

This study is designed to assist in understanding the sense of belonging and engagement experiences of military learners in higher education. Higher education researchers have studied the relationship between academic success, engagement practices on campus, and perceived sense of belonging (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Milem & Berger, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2015; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Studies have focused on at risk student groups including first-generation, freshman, and students of color. There is a noteworthy absence of research published on the relationship of military learners, campus engagement, and sense of belonging. Research confirms the connection between engagement in campus activities and the sense of belonging for non-traditional and first-generation populations (Kahu, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2012). Current research indicates that military learners share characteristics of other high-risk student populations and experience lower levels of academic, faculty, and peer engagement,

resulting in challenging transition processes to higher education (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Cole & Kim, 2013; Cook & Kim, 2009). In the case of military learners, the scope of support services on our campuses has primarily emphasized streamlining administrative processes, and fails to fully address their academic, personal, social, and professional needs (Green & Van Dusen, 2012).

Utilizing the College Student Sense of Belonging Model developed by Strayhorn (2012), the study explores the sense of belonging experienced by military learners and the impact academic employment may have on nurturing key engagement practices that support their academic success. For the purpose of this study, academic employment will be defined as the positions held by students who work as a teaching assistant, tutor, mentor, or research assistant in a department or entity on campus. The study explores the academic employment of students in the role of tutor at the campus learning center. The study seeks to deepen our understanding of the relationship between academic employment and a sense of belonging and engagement for military learners attending four-year colleges and universities.

Research Questions

This study explores the concept of perceived sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners. The qualitative research study examines the relationship of the academic employment of military learners and their perceived sense of belonging and engagement practices utilizing Strayhorn's Model of Sense of Belonging (2012). The qualitative research study seeks to expand Strayhorn's (2012) work to military learners who possess many similar learner characteristics identified in Strayhorn's previously studied student populations. Exploring the experiences of military learners, the study investigates the concept of sense of belonging and engagement as it relates to the role of academic tutor. Furthermore, the study

explores how the academic employment of military learners as tutors affects their perceived sense of belonging and engagement practices in college. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?
2. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?
3. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?
4. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Conceptual Framework

Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging, woven together with research studies linking student engagement practices with sense of belonging and student success, provided the conceptual framework for the study. Collegiate academic success is in "part a function of complicated, inextricably intertwined institutional factors and conditions" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2006, p. 1) that culminate in institutional support efforts and the ultimate degree achievement of collegiate students. Strayhorn's (2012) research assists higher education leadership in understanding ways to support specific student populations, including first-generation students, students of color, Latino students, Native American students, graduate students, science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) students of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) students. Using a comprehensive definition of sense of belonging and engagement, Strayhorn (2012) focused on student perceptions of connection and

inclusion rather than measures of assimilation into the academic culture. Strayhorn (2012) framed sense of belonging for college students as a basic psychological necessity that is strong enough to impact motivation and alter student behaviors. Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as the “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p. 112).

Strayhorn (2012) suggested the sense of belonging process occurs as students begin higher education and is reinforced throughout the college experience. Through research on the sense of belonging and engagement of marginalized student groups, Strayhorn (2008a, 2008b, 2012) found sense of belonging is particularly impactful for students with strong cultural identifications, increases in importance during times of transition, supports a student’s feelings of mattering, and produces positive academic outcomes such as persistence and graduation.

Much of the educational research on sense of belonging has focused on marginalized student groups, specifically students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). The higher education experience of military learners has emerged as an important population of research interest, as their numbers grow on college campuses (Kim & Cole, 2013). Current education research indicates the military learner population is comprised of marginalized student groups such as first-generation learners, adult students, and students of color (Brown & Gross, 2011; Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain et al., 2012; Wyatt, 2011). Furthermore, research indicates that military learners possess many of the same learner characteristics of other marginalized student populations such as difficulty establishing social connections and transitioning cultural identity to campus learning environments (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Ford & Vignare, 2014; Jones, 2013; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Strayhorn (2012) placed purposeful attention on the impact

cultural identity transition plays in a student's perception of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) observed that for marginalized students who feel disconnected or alienated from the campus community, there is increased importance for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement.

Significance of Study

The study explores the degree to which academic employment functions as a catalyst for sense of belonging and engagement, extending Strayhorn's (2012) research to military learners. Recognizing the rich experiences military learners bring to higher education, the research intends to deepen our understanding of sense of belonging and engagement broadening our knowledge of other marginalized student populations.

Underpinning the research study are questions regarding current policy and services that have been developed for the sole purpose of supporting the academic success and campus engagement of military learners. The study presents a new understanding of the sense of belonging of military learners in the collegiate setting, by incorporating Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging as a theoretical benchmark. Further, the study explores the impact of academic employment as an intervention tool used to promote campus engagement and sense of belonging.

The study adds to the limited existing research on the positive effects of academic employment, not only for military learners, but also for other marginalized student populations on the college campus. The study deepens our concept of the social and academic engagement of military learners and academic employment's relationship to their sense of belonging. The qualitative approach used in the study contributes to our understanding of military learners and assists academic leaders in developing strategies to better support these students.

Definitions

The following list of terms is provided to assist the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the study components, meanings, interpretations, and application to the collegiate campus.

G.I. Bill is a comprehensive legislation that provides a set of benefits that includes specific financial assistance for post-secondary education for the veterans of United States Armed Forces (McBain et al., 2012).

Post 9/11 G.I. Bill legislation that provides an expanded set of benefits that includes specific financial assistance for post-secondary education for the veterans, National Guard or Reserves and dependents of United States Armed Forces (McBain et al., 2012).

Military learners defined as the population of students associated with the military, including the variations in military affiliations: veterans, National Guard, Reserves, Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and active duty (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Student Veteran an enrolled student in post-secondary education who is on active duty, in the Reserves or National Guard, has retired from military service or has completed military service (Kirchner, 2015).

Student Soldier is a member of the National Guard or Reserves who is receiving educational assistance and is simultaneously enrolled in post-secondary education (Vest, 2014).

Military Friendly Campus encompasses the support services in place to assist military learners' adjustment to the campus environment (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Kirchner, 2015).

Persistence is the measure of a student's actions and mindset to continue enrollment at an institution of higher learning (Hagedorn, 2005).

First Year Retention the institutional measure of a student's enrollment from the first year to the second year (Hagedorn, 2005).

Retention the student's continued enrollment until the completion of a degree of study beyond the first year (Hagedorn, 2005).

Retention Rates the measure of how many students continue enrollment into the sophomore year (Hagedorn, 2005).

Attrition is the decrease in student enrollment resulting from lower student retention and persistence in college (Hagedorn, 2005).

Graduation Rates is a measurement of the number of students achieving degrees at the institution (Hagedorn, 2005).

Graduate is a student who has completed the required coursework at a college or university, earning the credentials of that degree of study by that institution (Hagedorn, 2005).

Campus Transition the transition from military service to the classroom environment (Branker, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Johnson & Rochkind, 2009; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011).

Institutional Fit the personal view of a student as fitting in with the other students enrolled on the campus at a particular moment in time (Seidman, 2005).

Campus Socialization the process of an enrolled student's connection to social components of the campus including peers, organization involvement, staff and faculty, and campus employment (Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Schlossberg, 1981, 1989).

Sense of Belonging the transitional experience of new students to the college campus as they acclimate to the college environment (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).

Student Engagement defined as elements of engagement that convey the attitudes, options, and perceptions of students (Tinto, 1998).

Student-Faculty Engagement the academic and social interactions that occur in class and out of class, between the student and faculty members (Astin, 1993).

Peer Engagement- the academic and social interactions between student and campus peers (Tinto, 1998).

Non-traditional Student- students aged 25 years and older enrolled in post-secondary institutions (Wyatt, 2011)

First-generation Student- a student who comes from a family that has never attended post-secondary education prior to the student's own college enrollment (Cole & Kim, 2013).

Peer Tutoring- the involvement of "the same societal group or social standing educating one another when one peer has more expertise or knowledge" (Colvin, 2007, p. 166).

Scope and Delimitations

The study was conducted at only one institution within the University of North Carolina Higher Education System. The sample population selected for the study was limited to military learners who are enrolled at the institution and serve or have served as academic tutors at the centralized learning center on the East Carolina University (ECU) campus. The ECU campus is in proximity to eight military facilities in the surrounding region and the study results will be beneficial to other institutions with enrolled military learners. It is important to acknowledge the prospect of research bias in this study. The primary researcher is the current director of the learning center that employs the participants in the study, although not the direct supervisor of the participants.

Summary

Striving to fill a gap in the research focused on contemporary students with military affiliations, the study explores ways in which higher education professionals can better support military learners attending four-year institutions. The qualitative research study strives for a greater understanding of the connection between the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners and includes student experiences in their own voice. Indicators of sense of belonging were examined, including cultural transition, peer engagement, and faculty engagement; the study explores how academic employment as tutors can amplify the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners.

Organization of Study

The study consists of five chapters. Chapter One includes an introduction to the study, the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, an overview of the conceptual frameworks of the study, study research questions, the significance of the study, definition of terms, scope and limitations, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two examines the literature review of the study, including a deeper understanding of the components introduced in Chapter One, as well as further exploration of the theoretical frameworks of cultural transition, learner characteristics, and student engagement. Chapter Three presents the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the qualitative study and Chapter Five further explores the research and, its implications and suggests areas for future study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter Two provides a review of literature focused on military learners in higher education, their origins, student characteristics, specific needs, beneficial higher education practices and the application of Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging. The review of literature incorporates the history of military learners and the G.I. Bill. It also examines themes regarding cultural transition, collegiate access, persistence, retention, conceptualization of military-friendly campuses, the specific needs and challenges facing military learners, and beneficial campus practices designed to support their academic success. The theoretical framework of Strayhorn (2012) is further examined as it extends our understanding of sense of belonging and engagement. Finding its foundation in the student development theories of Astin (1984, 1993), Tinto (1975, 1998), and Schlossberg (1981, 1989), Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging and research of marginalized student populations facilitates a deeper understanding of the military learner's need for sense of belonging and engagement in higher education.

Origins of Military Learners

Following World War II and the subsequent wars, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, generally referred to as the G.I. Bill, provided increased access for veterans to attend colleges and universities in the United States (McBain et al., 2012). The impact of the 1944 G.I. Bill, extension legislation, and more recently the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill are significant to the establishment of increased educational access for American citizens. The G.I. Bill legislation changed societal perceptions that higher education was limited to only the wealthy, created the ability for educational attainment for first-generation college students, and transformed the

socioeconomic status of many veterans and their dependents (Lighthall, 2012; Livingston et al., 2011). In regard to the G.I. Bill, Roach (2007) observed: “since its enactment, no single public policy has garnered more credit for the expansion of economic opportunity and higher education” (p. 1). On the 50th anniversary of the first G.I. Bill, U.S. President Bill Clinton commented, “...the G.I. bill was the greatest investment in our people in American history” (Roach, 2007, p. 1).

The 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act gave veterans increased access to higher education, and the impact of their enrollment was felt on campuses across the nation. By the fall of 1946, the popularity of the program doubled the enrollment sizes of many colleges (Thelin, 2004). Two years prior to World War II, college enrollments totaled 160,000 students but, by 1950 the number of enrolled students totaled 500,000 (Wilson, 1995). The 1985 Montgomery G.I. Bill added National Guard and Reserve members as eligible to receive educational benefits (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The 1985 provisions resulted in increased numbers of part-time service members while enrolled as full-time students, thus increasing the number of National Guard and Reservists on college campuses (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Since its inception, the G.I. Bill has expanded to include time of service and full- or part-time military status to determine the amount of educational benefits received by soldiers (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

According to the Congressional Research Service summarizing the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, there are four main components of the legislation: “(1) providing parity of benefits for reservists and members of the regular Armed Forces, (2) ensuring comprehensive educational benefits, (3) meeting military recruiting goals, and (4) improving military retention through transferability of benefits” (Dortch, 2012, p. 2). Eligible participants include veterans and active duty service

members of the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and Coast Guard who have served a minimum of 90 days on active duty following September 10, 2011 (Dortch, 2012). Eligible service members are entitled to educational assistance for a period of 36 months or its equivalent in part time status. Benefits may be extended and educational assistance determined based on interruptions of enrollment and active duty requirements (Dortch, 2012).

Higher education benefits under the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill have campuses experiencing increases in military learners. According to enrollment data, in the academic year 2009-10, a total of 270,666 students used the new G.I. Bill benefits (Sewall, 2010). In 2012, more than half a million veterans were enrolled in college classes (Sander, 2012a). Dortch (2012) reported that by the year 2010, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill program had reached the largest number of recipients and the highest financial commitment of any another G.I. Bill legislation.

Sander (2012a, 2012b) highlighted key differences between military learners on campuses in 1947 and contemporary students. For example, today's military learners comprise a small minority on college campuses (estimated to be 3% of undergraduates), in comparison to 1947 when half of the undergraduates were veterans (Sander, 2012a). Another notable dissimilarity between the G.I. Bill of 1946 and today is in the prevalence of military service in American society. Unlike contemporary conditions, in 1947 at the height of the G.I. Bill, military affiliation was common in American society. According to the Pew Research Center, only one-half of 1 percent of American adults has ever served on active duty. "This unfamiliarity, student veterans say, sometimes breeds stereotypes—about why they enlisted, their political or ideological beliefs, and what they did while in uniform" (Sander, 2012b, p. 4).

Access for Underrepresented Student Populations

Preceding World War II, higher education was unreachable for the average American. College and university enrollments consisted primarily of white males. Educationally, whites and blacks were segregated, with 85% of African Americans attending historically black colleges and universities (Wilson, 1995). Higher education enrollment was limited, with only 10% of Americans attending post-secondary institutions (Wilson, 1995). Wilson characterized the status of American society at the end of World War II as “poor, segregated, and with limited opportunities for women” (Wilson, 1995, p. 1). The G.I. Bill has increased higher education access for African Americans, underrepresented ethnic groups, and women, and it has facilitated their ability to achieve educational goals and participate in employment training opportunities (Wilson, 1995).

The 1944 G.I. Bill provided educational opportunities to African American veterans to attend colleges or training programs (Wilson, 1995). African American veterans were eligible for educational benefits, and increased access was realized in varying degrees based on geographic region (Thelin, 2004). Thelin (2004) observed “colleges that had traditionally excluded racial minorities continued to do so, with no penalty from the federal government” (p. 267). It became a tale of two different access experiences for African American veterans in northern states compared to those in southern states.

Prior to WW II, 85% of African Americans who attended college were enrolled in historically black colleges and universities (Wilson, 1995). The G.I. Bill did not change southern collegiate access. Due to the segregation of the South, most African American veterans used their G.I. benefits to attend either vocational training or a southern historically black college or university (HBCU) (Wilson, 1995). The significant increases in enrollments proved to be

challenging to HBCUs, and thus admission was denied to an estimated 20,000 African American veterans because of the lack of institutional capacity (Loss, 2012). In 1946 Congress responded to this growing problem by passing the Lanham Act, which allocated funds for HBCUs to build and repair their infrastructure to better accommodate enrollment demands (Wilson, 1995). In addition to crowded HBCU campuses, African American veterans struggled with insufficient academic preparation and therefore pursued vocational education in higher rates (Cole-Morton, 2013). Wilson (1995) reported that prior to the G.I. Bill, most African Americans attended HBCUs in the southern states, but the educational benefits provided northern African American veterans increased access to attend white colleges and universities in northern states.

The G.I. Bill opened access for veterans of European immigrant families, including the religious groups representing Catholics and Jews (Greenberg, 2004). Greenberg (2004) observed a reassessment of prewar prejudices against Catholics and Jews as a result of G.I. Bill educational access. Post-World War II, Jewish military veterans gained access to elite schools that had previously employed admission quotas barring access to higher education (Greenberg, 2004). “The G.I. Bill helped move these children of European immigrants into academe, business and the professions, and essentially eliminated religious bigotry in American higher education” (Greenberg, 2004, p. 4).

The 1944 G.I. Bill was a major contributor to Latinos gaining access to higher education (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003). Latino veterans took advantage of the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education and were integrated into the campuses. The Latino military experience differed from the African American experience. Latinos were integrated in the military with white troops, as opposed to the African American soldiers who were segregated during World War II (MacDonald, 2012). Post 9/11 access for Latinos is heightened with increased numbers of

Hispanic veterans attending college (MacDonald & Garcia, 2003). For many Latinos, military service has become a pathway enabling access to higher education opportunities.

Access to higher education for women using the 1944 G.I. Bill was surprisingly limited. Loss (2012) noted, “Although many women enjoyed the privileges of the G.I. Bill by way of marriage, fewer than 3% of all female veterans actually made use of the legislation in their own name” (p. 4). Clark (1998) and Thelin (2004) observed that enrollment increases of World War II females rose at some institutions as much as 35%, yet enrollment dropped to below 32% in 1950. Although the overall enrollment of women did rise, when compared to male enrollments, their numbers actually decreased to make way for the male veterans (Clark, 1998). Greenberg (2004) noted that the “present status of women in higher education can be better traced to the G.I. Bill linking the higher education success of the fathers and grandfathers” (p. 6).

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill tells a different story of female veteran access. Increases in the number of military affiliated women using educational benefits on college campuses reflects the increased numbers of females in the military between 2008 and 2013 (Sander, 2012a). Sander (2012a) reported that of all the veterans using the Post 9/11 educational benefits, one in five is female. In their study of student veteran access and success, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) noted the varying attributes and barriers female military learners bring to the college campus. For example, women exiting the military have higher incidents of sexual assault and are more likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) upon entering the college campus (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). In addition, female military learners are more likely to be single parents when entering an institution, adding financial and personal challenges to collegiate success (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Challenging Educational Conditions

The enrollment of military learners following each G.I. Bill benefit cycle has prompted higher education leadership to initiate new processes and support programs to address the unique challenges of these students. According to a qualitative research study conducted by Griffin and Gilbert (2012), Post 9/11 G.I. Bill military learners struggle with admission transcript evaluation decisions granted when enrolling in four-year institutions. Similarly, Zinger and Cohen's (2010) qualitative study of factors supporting student veteran success revealed the frustration of many veterans with admissions and transcript review processes. Military learners commonly express problems in processing benefits and admissions paperwork (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Griffin and Gilbert's (2012) research on student veteran collegiate experiences noted the Post 9/11 student veteran demands three primary process changes: (1) receiving transfer credit for military training and service experiences, (2) easier campus re-entry following deployments, and (3) streamlined G.I. Bill benefits procedures.

The influx of contemporary military learners prompts college campuses to adjust policies and services to better support their transition and academic success. Higher enrollments facilitate changes in admissions offices by challenging transcript and testing processes, expanding the need for campus accreditation, motivating the student consumerism movement and inspiring the establishment of veteran friendly support services (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, 2014). Many of these changes are the foundational components of contemporary campuses that are deemed "military friendly institutions" (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). "Military friendly" campuses are institutions with support "programs and people who are in place to assist with the transition between college and the military" (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012, p. 5). In his research on military learners, Wilson (2014) defined a military friendly campus as one that:

Understands that military students are transitioning from the professional military environment to the workforce, and academic work is part of that transition. A military friendly college is not one with a single office of military student services where all military students are referred, but is a culture of support that builds on the skills veterans bring to the academic setting, and supports the veterans' transition into the workforce (p. 1).

The enrollment of military learners has inspired the establishment of veteran friendly support services in higher education. The large student enrollments resulting from the 1944 G.I. Bill challenged campus infrastructures by increasing the need for more classrooms and residence halls for single and married students, and expanded scientific labs and research facilities (Thelin, 2004). While contemporary institutional responses to increased veteran enrollments are similar, research shows that Post 9/11 military learners have more transition issues and social needs than their World War II counterparts (Vacchi, 2012). The Post 9/11 military learners are choosing to enroll in campuses with established veteran support services and are attending institutions that are deemed "military friendly" (Heineman, 2014).

O'Herrin's (2011) research identified specific programs and services dedicated to addressing the needs of military learners and found that due to the diverse population of military learners, their needs are varied and cannot be categorized into a narrow, common definition. O'Herrin (2011) suggested that campus leaders should gauge the needs of the enrolled military learners specific to their campus. The Blue Ribbon Taskforce 2013 Report produced by the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities pointed to the adjustment needs of military learners and highlights the difficulties they experience in higher education. These include difficulties transitioning from the military to civilian classrooms, isolation with college peers, and difficulty maintaining faculty relationships (APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, 2013). Kirchner's (2015) research with military learners emphasized the desire of military learners to connect socially on campus.

Contemporary Military Learners

Military learners have diverse service experiences within post-secondary institutions. The term *military learner* defines the population of students associated with the many variations in military affiliations: veterans, National Guard, Reserves, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), and active duty (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) defined a veteran as someone who is 18 years of age or older, who is not currently classified as active duty and once served in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard, or who served in the Merchant Marine during World War II. The National Guard and Reserves is the largest growing classification within the military learner population (Vest, 2014). The requirements for National Guard members and Reservists are to attend basic training, annual 2-week training sessions, military training exercises one weekend per month, and to be ready for deployment at any time (Hamrick & Rumann, 2013; Vest, 2014). The Reserve Officer Training Corps, commonly referred to as ROTC, is composed of cadets who are enrolled as full-time students and participate in military and leadership training while attending college (Leal, 2007).

Characteristics of Military Learners

Military learners share similar needs and student characteristics, despite their differences in affiliation, as veterans, ROTC members, active duty soldiers, and National Guard or Reservists. In their study of military learners and influences on academic outcomes, Brown and Gross (2011) found that as a result of limited full-time academic experiences, military learners encounter transitional challenges when attending higher education on a full-time basis. Summarizing the support services integrated at Western Carolina University, Brown and Gross (2011) identified common characteristics of military learners. They are primarily adult learners

as defined by age, they often enter the four-year institution with community college coursework, and they frequently describe problematic transitions to the college campus as a result of their military involvement. Military learners infrequently begin academic studies as full-time freshmen, more often engaging in limited academic experiences prior to full-time enrollment (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Higher education statistics indicate that the typical military learner enrolls in three or more institutions prior to completing an undergraduate degree (Cole & Kim, 2013).

In their American Council on Education 2013 report on military learners in Higher Education, Cole and Kim (2013) analyzed the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement and observed specific characteristics of military learners. Their analysis revealed four primary attributes of contemporary military learners: (1) military learners comprise high levels of ethnic and racial diversity as compared to non-military peers, (2) military learners are more likely to be male, (3) military learners are more likely to be first-generation college students having entered military service with the intent to use educational benefits, and (4) military learners have higher financial needs than traditionally aged peers (Kim & Cole, 2013). Kim and Cole (2013) estimated that 62% of military learners are first generation compared to 43% of collegiate peers. As a student population, research shows that first-generation students often express difficulty in navigating the college campus and are more likely to require academic support (Cole & Kim, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012).

Non-Traditional Students

In a study of non-traditional student perspectives in higher education, Wyatt (2011) identified characteristics of older students commonly shared by military learner populations. Although large numbers of Post 9/11 G.I. Bill recipients are under the age of 25, Wyatt (2011)

described military learners as mature learners as a result of their military involvements external from campus. Wyatt (2011) defined a mature learner as one “whose prior knowledge includes a significant element derived from work or life experience in addition to, or instead of any prior formalized study” (p. 13). Wyatt (2011) extended the mature learners’ characteristics to military learners regardless of age. The Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report (2013) also described military learners as fitting the characteristics of non-traditional students due to attributes other than age. Many of these students often delay entry into institutions of higher learning, are transfer students, are part-time and often distance education learners, and have significant life experiences outside of the campus (APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, 2013).

Brown and Gross (2011) summarized the challenges military learners experience on campus. Their article reinforced the concept of “military friendly” campuses and summarized policies and programs designed to facilitate the academic success of military learners at Western Carolina University. Brown and Gross (2011) defined veterans and military learners as a special population of adult learners. In their book, *From Soldier to Student II*, McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) provided an updated national perspective on programs, policies, and services dedicated to serving military learners. The authors reported the average age of military learners enrolled in four year institutions as 33 compared to 22 of non-military learners (McBain et al., 2012). Based on this report, military learners’ best fit the profile of non-traditional students on the post-secondary campus (Brown & Gross, 2011; Cole & Kim, 2013).

It is important to note the non-traditional nature of military learners as compared to traditionally aged collegiate peers (Kircher, 2015). These differences can become impediments to their academic success (Kircher, 2015). In a 2011 study of non-traditional students, Wyatt (2011) found these students engaged with faculty and peers on campus less than traditionally

aged undergraduates. Describing non-traditional students as “prepackaged,” Wyatt (2011) highlighted the unique nature of non-traditional students who “possess a greater sense of maturity, experiences, and values as well as different learning goals and objectives” (p. 13). Wyatt (2011) encouraged higher education leadership to acknowledge the unique needs military learners.

The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) 2013 Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report identified and documented best practices addressing the needs of military learners and noted the non-traditional nature of military learners:

Similar to other non-traditional students, the characteristics that define military and veteran students as non-traditional are often risk factors to retention and degree or diploma attainment. However, there are additional, unique factors that have historically impacted military and veteran persistence rates, such as being deployed in the middle of a program or attending a program while deployed or the stress of transitioning from service member to civilian to student. Recent research has pointed to certain factors that may make the adjustment from the military to the classroom more difficult, including the timing gap between high school and college, lack of socialization with student peers, and insufficient institutional support (APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report, 2013, p. 3).

It is important to note as non-traditional students, military learners similarly express higher levels of concern regarding their ability to achieve academically as compared to traditionally aged peers (Wyatt, 2011). Military learners are more likely to work off-campus, and more likely to be married with family responsibilities (Wyatt, 2011). Cole and Kim (2013) described non-traditional learners and military learners as having decreased connections with faculty members or peers outside of the classroom as compared to other undergraduate students. The authors encouraged collegiate leadership roles with increasing levels of engagement to support the academic success of military learners (Cole & Kim, 2013).

First-Generation Students

In the book *From Soldier to Student*, authors McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) offered a national view of the services, programs, and policies designed to support military learners. The authors analyzed national enrollment data and found 62% of military learners report first-generation status compared to 43% of non-military learners (McBain et al., 2012). The research of Cole and Kim (2013), and Wyatt (2011) indicated that the college experience for first-generation students differs from their undergraduate peers. First-generation students are at a higher risk of failing to persist and not graduating (Cole & Kim, 2013; Wyatt, 2011). First-generation students often experience lower levels of engagement with staff, faculty, and campus peers, placing first-generation students in higher risk of non-persistence (Wyatt, 2011). First generation students often experience difficulty navigating competing educational, personal, and family expectations and often feel disconnected from academia (Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015). For the military learner, the combination of first-generation attributes and military experiences challenges their ability to achieve academic success.

Disability Needs

In qualitative research studies of military learners, Naphan and Elliott (2015), Branker (2009), and O'Herrin (2011) identified the problematic nature of disabilities for some military learners. Military learners who come to campus with physical or mental health needs present a challenge for both the student and higher education leadership (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Branker (2009) focused her research on the experiences and needs of veterans with disabilities as they enter higher education environments. Branker (2009) found that combat-related disabilities pose unique challenges for some military learners on the college campus. "Student veterans with disabilities may not be as prepared as their civilian non-disabled peers and may need campuses

to rethink and reframe existing paradigms if they intend to reintegrate, retain, and eventually graduate this population of students” (Branker, 2009, p. 64). Higher numbers of military learners coming to campus with disabilities require additional campus disability support services to help achieve their academic goals (O’Herrin, 2011).

Cultural Gaps

In a study of military learners in distance education learning environments, Starr-Glass (2015) observed intersections of military culture and academic culture in the educational experiences of military learners. In Strayhorn’s (2015) research on the navigator role played by academic advisors for at-risk student populations, he defined culture as “shared attitudes or patterns of behaviors characteristic of a particular social group or collective that distinguishes it from another” (p. 58). Academic culture encompasses the beliefs, language, norms of behavior, and customs of the organization (Strayhorn, 2015). Tierney (1988) connected culture with organizations, defining organizational culture as rooted in shared experiences, beliefs and assumptions. Similarly, in his book, *“How Colleges Work”* Birnbaum (1988) defined organizational culture as the shared beliefs and values which influence individual behavior, sense of identity, and commitment to the organization itself.

Kuh and Whitt (1988) examined campus culture and defined it as a collection of norms, practices, beliefs, and values that are accepted and influence behavior of students and other campus stakeholders. Campus culture provides context for understanding and interpreting meaning from events and experiences on campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Furthermore, campus culture influences the conduct of student groups and individuals in higher education environments and communicates shared norms, activities, histories, values, beliefs and practices (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). In their overview of organizational culture and higher education, McGrath

and Tobia (2008) characterized organizational culture as an indistinguishable influence in the experiences of students. Additionally, Strayhorn's (2015) work with sense of belonging of college students placed importance on cultural connectivity and described culture as transferrable through socialization allowing for student groups to understand and connect to campus life.

In his study of military learners in distance education learning environments, Starr-Glass (2015) underscored the importance of military culture on the educational experiences of military learners. Military learners are "defined by their military culture," and are "representatives of a minority culture" on campus (Starr-Glass, 2015, p. 96). According to Starr-Glass (2015), in order for faculty to adequately address the needs of and provide educational opportunities for military learners, they must identify and validate the specific characteristics of these students. Citing cultural gaps as problematic for military learners, Starr-Glass (2015) attributed the disconnection between military culture and academic culture as responsible for producing a cultural gap in understanding. These cultural gaps can be attributed to negatively influencing the academic transition and academic success of military learners in higher education (Starr-Glass, 2015).

The research studies of Kelty, Kleykamp and Segal (2010), Kuehner (2013), and Naphan and Elliott (2015) on student veteran success have identified cultural transition from the military to academic as problematic for military learners. Kelty et al. (2010) describe military culture as a hyper-masculine environment, which the military has purposely developed and maintained as a distinct and identifiable culture, compared to civilian and academic life. Naphan and Elliott (2015) noted the routine nature of military life, often characterized by little autonomy and decision-making concerning everyday tasks. Kuehner (2013) described military culture as consisting of a unique set of beliefs, practices, experiences, sense of self, and hierarchies that differ from campus culture. Starr-Glass (2015) described college life in direct opposition with

military life, illustrating the greater ability and opportunity for personal choice in academic environments. Unlike academia, soldiers are immersed in values of self-reliance, team work, hierarchical command and communication structures, and specific rules and norms for behavior unlike those found in civilian organizations (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Starr-Glass, 2015).

Similar to military culture, higher education can also be described as a unique culture (Strayhorn, 2015). The academy holds common beliefs, values, norms, and language that are very different from what students have experienced (Strayhorn, 2015). Jones (2013) observed that higher education culture is shared through an acculturation process, “where students absorb the shared knowledge, mannerisms, and thinking process of the academe” (p. 11). In their research study of Latino students, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students from defined cultural backgrounds, not unlike military learners, are faced with transition challenges as they encounter the academic community in which few fully understand the nuances of their new academic culture.

In their research study on military learners at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, practitioners Kirchner, Coryell, and Binniecki (2014) shared the educational experiences and perspectives of military learners. They observed the loss of connection that soldiers first establish in the military culture, in the transition to higher education and civilian life. Similarly, Kirchner et al. (2014) reported that when transitioning to the academic campus, military learners lose “the interdependency and cohesiveness created and nurtured in the military unit” (p. 13), often resulting in a cultural gap and identity crisis.

Callahan and Jarrat (2014) identified common incompatibilities in norms and behaviors between military learners and campus stakeholders. Their research revealed difficult transitions to academic culture, wherein military learners often find themselves challenged by the freedom

and individualism of academia (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). In their qualitative study of culture and military learners, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) found military learners are challenged by the possession of military mindsets despite enrollment on the college campus, identifying more as service members than as students.

Following a phenomenological study documenting identity development in military learners, Jones (2013) made several observations regarding the cultural transition of military learners to academic culture. Jones (2013) observed disconnections in the manner in which military learners identify themselves in military life from the way they establish their identity on the college campus. These disconnections result in a crisis of identity as they transition from military to civilian life (Jones, 2013). As the military student transitions onto campus, their experience is challenged by the norms, values, and expectations of military culture versus those of academic culture:

Much of military training forces service members into pre-assigned identities that, while valued in the military, may have little correlation in their new roles as students in higher education. Understanding how this group makes meaning during this transition will help educators offer appropriate curricular and co-curricular support that promotes openness and adaptability for veterans moving from a regimented, external-authority-based environment toward developing self-authorship and establishing a post-military identity (Jones, 2013, p. 1).

Researchers Griffin and Gilbert (2015), Naphan and Elliott (2015) and Vacchi (2012) noted the significance of cultural identity for military learners. Military learners encounter challenges in establishing a campus identity following deployments (Vacchi, 2012). The war zone identity that must be maintained during deployment is often deeply entrenched in their self-concept, causing difficulty in transitioning to the role of college student (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). Service length is also a contributing factor for military-campus identity crisis (Vacchi, 2012). Vacchi (2012) observed, “the longer the service of a military service member,

the deeper the military socialization is for the veteran, but even a short tour of duty can create a strong military socialization” and military identity (p. 18).

In their article, “Supporting Student Veterans in Transition,” Rumann and Hamrick (2009) provided a historical overview of the G.I. Bill and its impact on specific military populations. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) reflected on cultural identity change, finding active National Guard, Reservists, and ROTC members particularly vulnerable when confronted with frequent military-to-campus transitions following deployment or active duty. This observation is supported by the work of Vest (2014), who stressed that Guard members, Reservists and ROTC cadets navigate both campus and military cultures frequently and are challenged to manage competing identities, negotiating “dual belonging” in civilian and military worlds (p.106). Contemporary military learners struggle to manage these dueling identities, but when they are provided support services their academic success is achievable (Vacchi, 2014).

Cultural gaps occur while military learners transition from military culture to the dominant culture of higher education. The work of Berry and Candis (2013) on cultural identity and higher education can be applied to the military learner community. Berry and Candis (2013) defined the higher education cultural gap as the disconnection between the culture of the learner and the educational institution they have joined. In their work, “Called to Serve,” Hamrick and Rumann (2012) observed the gap between military and academic cultures which often results in a challenge of identity and causes social disconnect for the military learner. Lacking the deep connections felt while in military service, military learners find themselves disengaged and detached from non-military peers on campus (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012). Cultural differences can negatively affect a student’s capacity to establish social connections and can negatively impact perceptions of institutional fit and academic validation. “Cultural differences, cultural

clashes, and cultural collisions” (Fang, 2012, p. 4) in academic environments causes a cultural distance for the learner. Often caught between competing identities, military learners must adopt new identities to successfully navigate the differences between military culture and academic culture.

Identity Transition

The transition from military life to the civilian campus is distinguished by a clash of cultural identities. Educational research on student veteran identity development indicates challenges encountered by military learners as they alter their identity from military culture to academic culture (Jones, 2013; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). The research of Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) focused attention on the transition of military learners to higher education. Their work placed a greater importance on identity transition as a factor relating to military learner success on campus. Deeply rooted in cultural transition, the research on student veteran academic success indicates challenges posed by identity transitions for military learners as they move from military service to the classroom environment (Vest, 2014). Highlighted by differences in age, life experience, military culture, deployments, and transition experiences, many military learners describe encounters with academic and social barriers that impact their transition and connectedness to college (Cole & Kim, 2013). To succeed, a military student must discover ways to adapt to the campus culture and leave military life behind (Cole & Kim, 2013; Vest, 2014).

There is considerable research on the transition issues experienced by military learners who are no longer serving in the armed forces. Little research, however, has been published regarding the transition experiences of military learners who are active soldiers in ROTC, National Guard or Reserves. These student soldiers experience frequent transitions from college

to military environments. In some areas, parallel transition experiences are observed in both active duty and veteran students. In the case of all military learners, we can expect the informal interactions that occur outside of the classroom environment to have greater social impact as indicated in the higher education research conducted by Pascerella (1980).

Academic and Engagement Challenges

The retention, persistence and completion outcomes of military learners has emerged as an increasingly significant concern for contemporary higher education stakeholders (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; McGrath & Burd, 2012). Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) reported that despite growing enrollment numbers on the college campus, half of military learners do not complete a degree. The statistics are noteworthy; 71% of veterans use G.I. Bill benefits, but the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that only six percent deplete their benefits (Ryan et al., 2011). Branker (2009) and Callahan and Jarrat (2014) emphasized the personal and economic ramifications of failure to complete a college degree. For the military learners, there are many personal and economic ramifications of their failure to successfully complete degree programs. For the institution, the successful transition and course completion of military undergraduates allows for a steady revenue pipeline of students (Branker, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Programs and services designed to support the academic integration of military learners are imperative to increasing their rates of retention, persistence and degree completion.

The need for additional support services for military learners is supported in the literature; yet, retention, persistence, and degree attainment rates of military learners are still areas that warrant additional study. In an article published in the *Adult Learning Journal* in 2015, Kirchner provided a summary of military learners and their transition to college campuses.

Kirchner (2015) reported that student veteran retention rates are estimated to range from 12% to 60% higher than the national average, highlighting the challenge of tracking military learners on college campuses. The Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report (2013) acknowledged the difficulty in defining military student success in traditional terms:

The postsecondary success of military and veteran students is dependent on any number of external factors that need to be considered instead of applying traditional measures to this student population. Military and veteran students are non-traditional students. These students: are adult learners; bring transfer credits to their institution; frequently need to transfer to different institutions; often need to take breaks during their education; have families; and, can rarely commit to full-time status for the duration of their academic career. Additionally, academic success for the military or veteran student frequently does not fit neatly into a defined outcome definition. Military and veteran students may achieve education success by earning enough college credits to earn their next rank or learn a specific skill, but not earn a certificate or degree (p.5).

Decreased Socialization

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) introduced the importance of higher education as an agent of socialization in their examination of the effect residence halls had on freshman academic outcomes. They observed an important relationship between faculty and peer interactions as a facilitator of supportive campus connections (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Their concept of higher education as a socializing organization is essential to understanding the social transition military learners experience on the college campus. The interactions students encounter with faculty, peers, staff, and administrators are instrumental to the civilian and campus socialization of military learners (Kirchner, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). The work of Rossi (1966) measuring the impact of peer group interactions showed that informal interactions can alter a student's campus socialization. Informal interactions have the ability to transition students toward more commonly held behaviors, opinions and values of the individuals they encounter on campus (Rossi, 1966).

Tinto (1998) and Astin (1993) both attributed collegiate success to the reciprocal relationship between the social and academic aspects of the academy. It is through faculty, peer and academic interactions that students discover their institutional fit and establish a positive student/institution relationship match (Tinto, 1998). Astin's work (1993) placed importance on the frequency of faculty and peer interactions as an indicator of student success, especially for underrepresented groups (Astin, 1993).

Karp, Hughes and O'Gara (2008, 2010) examined the social integration component of Tinto's work. Applying the social integration framework to community college students, Karp et al. (2008) observed the relationship between social and academic life on campus. Karp et al. (2008) found social integration support networks can assist students who enroll for shorter periods of time and can enhance academic success through frequent faculty and peer interactions. Commonly referenced in the literature, military learners express that cultural differences between military hierarchy and academic culture is problematic to their connection to campus peers (Osborne, 2014b).

Osborne's (2014b) qualitative research from two focus groups and fourteen interviews with military learners provided insight into the social connectivity of military learners in post-secondary institutions and how these relationships impact their ability to be socialized to the campus community. Osborne (2014b) observed difficulty for military learners to establish social connections and recognized the positive impact personal relationships on campus have on college decisions, persistence, and degree attainment. Military learners commonly report feelings of separation and isolation from campus peers as a result of their military and life experiences (Osborne, 2014b). Often rooted in cultural gaps and differences in life experiences between military and academia, these factors create social barriers and result in decreased levels of social

connection (Osborne, 2014b). Feeling the loss of the team and fellow soldiers found in military culture, military learners find themselves lacking the social connections they experienced in military life (Osborne, 2014b). Ford and Vignare (2015) conducted a review of literature focused on military learners; their work attributed cultural gaps between military and higher education as a significant impediment to the socialization of military learners.

Lower Levels of Student Engagement

The research findings of Branker (2009) and Callahan and Jarrat (2014) indicated that military learners frequently describe decreased feelings of belonging and campus engagement as compared to non-military collegiate peers. As a result of varied military experiences, many military learners describe heightened feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers and faculty on our campuses (Branker, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). For these students, amplified feelings of detachment negatively impact their degree of campus engagement and involvement, fundamental components of a sense of belonging and educational achievement.

Kinzie, Gonyea, Kuh, Umbach, Blaich, and Korkmaz (2007) examined the patterns of engagement of male and female undergraduates. Seeking to extend Astin's (1984, 1993) involvement theory, Kinzie et al. (2007) defined student engagement as two components: (1) time and effort students put into studies and educational activities, and (2) how institutions offer and encourage support services to undergraduates. Focused on gender relationships related to levels of engagement in educational activities, Kinzie et al.'s (2007) research revealed that undergraduate women have higher levels of participation in educational activities than their male counterparts. Their analysis illustrated that male students devote less time and effort to academic tasks and engage less in collaborative learning activities. Kinzie et al. (2007) advocated for enhanced programming designed to encourage higher levels of male engagement in educational

activities and support services. Corroborating this research finding, Kim and Cole's 2013 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) analysis revealed that military learners, who are primarily male, are less likely than non-military learners to devote time outside of the classroom to any activities that are not class requirements. Kim and Cole (2013) highlighted the significant difference between the hours military and non-military learners devoted to campus engagement activities. Table 1 states the activities of military learners and non-military learners above 10 hours.

Peer Engagement

Zumbrunn, McKim, Buhs, and Hawley (2014) conducted a mixed methods study with college students enrolled at a large four-year institution. Their study examined how sense of belonging through peer interactions impacts academic motivation and achievement. Zumbrunn et al.'s (2014) research indicated a strong correlation between peer connections and student perceptions of support. Their research highlighted a "student's need for relatedness or belonging, defined as the extent to which students feel accepted and supported by teachers and peers" (Zumbrunn et al., 2014, p. 662). Kim and Cole's (2013) work with military learners also revealed significantly lower levels of peer connections on campus. Kim and Cole (2013) observed: "though many student veterans report good relationships with faculty, they are not as likely to report good relationships with other students and are less likely to engage with other students when completing class assignments" (p. 18).

Applicable to the experiences military learners encounter in higher education, Morrow and Ackermann (2012) investigated the relationship between a sense of belonging and first-year retention of college students. Hypothesizing that a higher sense of belonging would be related to self-reported intention to persist as well as actualized second-year retention, Morrow and

Table 1

Activities of Military Learners and Non-Military Learners

Activity	% of Military Learner	% of Non-Military Learner
Preparing for class	69.5	65.4
Relaxing and socializing	35.2	44.1
Working for pay off campus	43.1	29.6
Providing care for dependents	43.1	12.1
Participating in co-curricular activities	10.9	17.0
Working for pay on campus	8.7	13.9
Communing to class	72.0	39.0

Note. These data are sourced from the 2012 NSSE (Kim & Cole, 2013, p. 8).

Ackermann (2012) observed that high levels of positive motivation and sense of belonging correlate to persistence and retention. Their study results revealed peer support as a significant predictor of retention.

Faculty Engagement

The foundational research of Chickering (1969) and Pascarella (1980) highlighted the importance of informal faculty interactions on academic success, sense of belonging and educational aspirations of college students. Chickering and Gamson (1991) underscored the impact of faculty student interactions on student engagement and involvement in the academic community. Providing a practical application of Astin's theory of involvement, Chickering and Gamson highlighted that active involvements with academic pursuits and frequent faculty interactions are a reflection of a student's overall institutional commitment.

In their article "From Combat to Campus: Voices of Student Veterans," DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) interviewed 25 military learners on several college campuses. Their research indicated that military learners experience impediments to establishing meaningful relationships with faculty members. Military experiences often present cultural barriers to maintaining deeper faculty connections (DiRamio et al., 2008). Karp et al. (2008) also stressed the importance of faculty connection and academic success, and for the military learner, a disconnection with faculty members can be instrumental in lowering their ability to persist. Kim and Cole's 2013 NSSE data analysis revealed while 61% of military learners describe positive relationships with faculty, higher education leadership should be concerned with the disconnected relationship maintained by 39% of the respondents. Recognizing the high impact of faculty engagement on student success, the disconnection of military learners from faculty relationships is an area of concern.

Impact of Academic Employment

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) examined responses from a qualitative research study focused on how institutions impact military learners and their transition from military life to the civilian workforce. The data collected in the study revealed insights into the needs of military learners from several participating institutions. The authors observed the challenges transitions cause as the military learner transcends from the military environment to the civilian workplace, placing them at a disadvantage (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Military learners experience a disconnection from military work expectations and skills sets when transitioning to job-related skills demanded by the civilian workforce (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Many enter higher education as a means to support their transition to the civilian workplace (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Despite college and military experiences, the need for workforce readiness skill development for military learners is compounded by the expectations of today's global marketplace.

For the military learner, the interconnectedness of our global marketplace dictates the development of workforce readiness skills sets. In a 2008 survey of employers, the Partnership of 21st Century Skills found that the five most important skills employers coveted were: (1) professionalism, (2) teamwork, (3) oral communication, (4) ethics and social responsibility, and (5) reading comprehension (Hodge & Lear, 2011). Beyond curriculum inclusion, workforce skills can be enhanced through student involvement in three institutional delivery methods including: (1) civic engagement, (2) experiential experiences, and (3) on-campus work. Cole and Kim (2013) reported that military learners are less likely to be involved in off-campus learning opportunities and therefore do not benefit from these high-impact processes. Reflective of the increasingly competitive and diverse marketplace students enter after graduation, military learners find civilian workforce transition problematic (Cole & Kim, 2013). The differences

between the military and civilian workplace position military learners at an employment disadvantage unless assistance and skill development are provided by post-secondary campuses (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Wilson's (2014) qualitative research at Western Kentucky University provided a review of the academic goals and support needs of military learners. Wilson's research findings stressed the amplified need for military learners to transition military skill sets to the workforce skills necessary for civilian employment. Even though military experiences provide valuable skills that can be transferable to civilian careers, Cole and Kim (2013) found campus-based employment as an effective vehicle for military learners to gain additional workforce skills required by the civilian workplace.

The research of Stanton (1987) and Robotham (2009) connected experiential experiences and workforce skill set attainment. Stanton (1987) described workforce readiness skills as achieved by participation in experiential experiences beyond the classroom, and instrumental in building civilian career readiness skills. Robotham (2009) conducted a study exploring types and characteristics surrounding part-time employment of university students. Robotham (2009) found that the primary positive outcome of campus work experiences was rooted in the transferrable skills gained while on the job. These skills include improved ability to work with diverse populations, increased communication skills, and an enhanced understanding of the workplace (Robotham, 2009).

Campus Employment

Kathman and Kathman (2000) examined the role of campus employment training programs for students in building essential workplace readiness skills. They contended that campus-based employment provides students the prospect of enhancing personal workplace

skills and fosters essential relationships between student workers, faculty and staff (Kathamn & Kathman, 2000). Unlike off-campus jobs, students who work on campus are presented with frequent opportunities to engage with the campus community and be supported by campus leaders in their professional development outside the classroom (Kathman & Kathman, 2000). Students serving in campus work engage in frequent interactions with campus employers, which provide a unique opportunity to enhance student career knowledge, build needed professional skills, and offer participation in meaningful professional interactions (Kathman & Kathman, 2000). Kathman and Kathamn (2000) maintained that workplace skills development begins with the hiring process which is instrumental in helping students gain professional skills. Military learners can greatly benefit from on-campus work experiences that expose them to the civilian workplace and teach the skills necessary to be competitive in the civilian marketplace.

Tutoring

Widely used to support student academic success, peer tutoring is commonly found in post-secondary institutions. Peer tutoring is defined by Goodlad and Hirst (1989) as a “system of instruction in which learners help each other learn by teaching” (p. 13). Topping (2005) defined peer learning as the “acquisition of knowledge and skills through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (p. 631). Peer tutoring, therefore, is an extension of peer learning and is differentiated by the roles of tutor and tutee and focuses on achieving greater course content understanding (Topping, 2005). Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes, and Mellis (2016) describe peer tutoring as “people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching” (Burgess et al., 2016, p. 1).

Jennifer Keup (2016) described peer leadership (tutors, mentors, orientation leaders) as a high impact practice that is beneficial for the student. Keup (2016) found students in peer leadership roles gain as much from the experiences as the students they serve:

More specifically, students in these leadership roles report: development in their communication and leadership skills; integrative and applied learning; knowledge of campus resources; interaction with faculty, staff, and peers; critical thinking, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking skills; the ability to work under pressure; interpersonal skills; and an awareness and appreciation of diversity. Furthermore, there is evidence of enhanced ability to manage groups, empathize with students and facilitate learning. Given the mutuality and breadth of benefits to both the students being served and the undergraduates assuming the leader roles, peer leadership has been identified as an emerging high-impact practice (Keup, 2016, p.32-33).

In a quantitative study drawn from the 2009 National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition Peer Leadership Survey, Keup (2016) analyzed responses regarding the perceptions of change as reported by peer leaders, of which 58.6% were academic peer leaders. Keup's (2016) analysis revealed a strong perception by peer leaders regarding change in undergraduate experiences including increased frequency of interactions with peers and faculty and development of a deeper sense of belonging at the institution. Within the survey responses, Keup (2016) found that peer leaders who received pay for their service reported higher levels of interactions with staff, faculty and peers in comparison to volunteers. As indicated in Table 2, over 90% of peer leaders indicated gains in relationships with peers, staff and faculty (Keup, 2016).

There are many benefits to the tutoring process for both tutee and tutor alike. The peer connections students make within the tutoring activities is particularly impactful in the higher education experience of tutors (Calma & Eggins, 2012). Peer tutoring provides the student in the role as tutor to have increased opportunities to engage with course materials and interact with

Table 2

Impact of Peer Leadership on Undergraduate Experience

Experience	% reporting “Increased”
Meaningful interaction with peers	89.1
Meaningful interaction with staff members	85.6
Meaningful interactions with faculty	82.8
Feeling of belonging at institution	80.7
Desire to persist at institution	70.7

Note. N=1,654. (Keup, 2016, p. 41).

peers on campus (Calma & Eggins, 2012). Calma and Eggins observed:

It is vital therefore that student are given many opportunities to participate and interact with peers in class...One of the most common contexts for peer interaction is in small group environments like tutorials. Improving interaction in these tutorials can lead to a number of benefits including: increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives; better preparation for the workplace; improved language skills; and a greater feeling of belonging (Calma & Eggins, 2012, p. 214).

Sampson, Boud, Cohen and Gaynor (1999) also noted the reciprocal relationship between tutor and tutee. Sampson et al. (1999) recognized the value of structured learning and that the process of learning from each other provided opportunities for collaborative work, and supported the development of skills essential to the workplace.

In a qualitative study involving focus group sessions of tutors and tutees participating in a peer tutoring program for medical students, Burgess, Dornan, Clarke, Menezes, and Mellis (2016) found that tutoring helped form cultural and social support for both tutor and tutee. In their study, tutors reported the beneficial nature of their role in their development of content knowledge and experience teaching, and deepening their sense of identity within their chosen profession (Burgess et al., 2016). Tutors regarded the tutoring program as a learning environment that was enjoyable and supportive (Burgess et al., 2016). In focus group sessions, tutors revealed the beneficial nature of participating in a peer-supported learning environment and expressed enhanced sense of belonging and community (Burgess et al., 2016). Furthermore, the researchers noted:

A sense of belonging is fostered when students feel they are being treated as members of one community, with similar goals and purpose. The learning environment afforded by the tutors promoted supportive interactions between the tutors and tutees that fostered confidence for both groups of students. Tutors gained confidence in their own knowledge, and in their teaching skills (Burgess et al., 2016, p. 5).

In a similar qualitative study, Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017) explored how postgraduate business students formed a sense of belonging within a learning environment supported by tutors. They observed the beneficial nature of the tutoring process in making students feel valued, which positively impacted their perceived belonging (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017).

Beneficial Campus Practices

Higher Education leadership has begun to respond to the growing needs and demands of military learners enrolled on their campuses. In a study of over 700 college campuses, Cook and Kim (2009) found gaps in support programs dedicated to military learners, reporting only 4% with veteran specific orientation, 22% providing programs assisting with transitional issues, and only 57% provide training for staff and faculty about veteran needs. Although these numbers appear low, progress is being made toward providing additional support services specifically targeted at military learners. The research of Griffin and Gilbert (2012), Rumann and Hamrick (2009), Griffin and Van Dusen (2012), and O'Herrin (2011) highlighted specific beneficial practices that can provide additional support networks for military learners. These practices include veteran specific orientation, peer connections, establishing support networks, and building campus awareness.

Military learners can benefit from specialized campus orientations focused on specific benefits and resources designed to support their transition from military life to the college campus (O'Herrin, 2011). Military learners commonly encounter difficulty adjusting from military mindsets to an academic focus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O'Herrin, 2011). Military learners often express feelings of frustration when navigating the campus environment and benefit from programs designed to introduce, educate and support their campus transition (O'Herrin, 2011).

Military learners benefit from services that link them with peer support systems on campus designed to build campus support networks (Cole & Kim, 2013). Tinto (2006) underscored the importance of students to “remain connected to their past communities; family, church, or tribe is essential to their persistence” (p. 4). The coordination of services of many campus offices and staff facilitates greater support initiatives that directly address the specific needs of military learner (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).

In a paper based on their 2012 presentation for the American Counseling Association Conference, Green and Van Dusen (2012) reviewed the impact of support programs of military learners enrolled in higher education. Green and Van Dusen (2012) observed the disconnection of military learners from average collegiate peers as a result of military involvements which mature students and alter their world view. Maintaining positive relationships with peers can often assist military learners in transitioning to the campus (Green & Van Dusen, 2012; Nephan & Elliott, 2015). The establishment of on-campus military student clubs or organizations can assist military learner in forming peer connections.

Higher education leaders can support student veteran awareness programming so that faculty, staff, and students gain a better sense of military culture, the needs of transitioning military learners, and improved social understanding (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Griffin and Gilbert (2012) highlighted the strong impact of faculty and staff on the experience of military learners on the college campus. Increased knowledge and understanding of the needs of the military student is an essential component of their collegiate success.

Theoretical Framework

Strayhorn’s (2008a, 2002b, 2012) Model of Sense of Belonging is the guiding framework for this study. Strayhorn’s (2012) model focused on the engagement of students both

academically and socially and the intersections students experience within the campus community. Finding its origins in the student development theories of Alexander Astin (1984, 1993), Tinto (1998), and Nancy Schlossberg (1981, 1989), Strayhorn (2012) focused on the basic human need for belonging. Strayhorn (2012) maintained that sense of belonging is supported by social spaces and contexts on campus and impacts student outcomes of involvement, achievement, campus fit and retention.

The building block theories of Astin (1984, 1993), Tinto (1998), and Schlossberg (1981, 1989) aid in our understanding of the higher education experiences of military learners and their specific needs for achieving academic success. Their work is applicable to the specific challenges encountered by military learners presented in the literature including: heightened feelings of campus isolation from peers and faculty, difficulty transitioning cultural identity, reoccurring academic transitions as a result of frequent military activities, and a diminished degree of campus engagement and validation.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Alexander Astin (1984, 1993) offered an explanation of student collegiate success, and cited the importance of student activity or involvement an investment of the student in their academic experience (Astin, 1984, 1993). Astin's Involvement Theory is fundamental to better understanding college persistence and a student's ability to transition successfully. Emphasizing the connection between student involvement and persistence as a reflection of the student's overall institutional commitment, Astin maintained that higher levels of involvement ultimately lessen the possibility of student departure (Astin, 1984, 1993).

Involvement theory includes motivation and student choices and is "concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development" (Astin, 1984, p. 522).

Astin incorporated time as the most important student resource on a college campus, and conceptualized time as an institutional resource, defining the time invested to achieve collegiate goals as “a direct function of the time and effort they (students) devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (Astin, 1984, p. 522). Within the involvement theory framework, a successful student is considered as one who devotes high levels of energy to academic pursuits, including studying, faculty interactions, connections with collegiate peers, and participation in campus organizations, and who can be described as highly engaged (Astin, 1984, 1993). On the other hand, the student who is less involved with their studies, faculty and campus life would, as a consequence, be less likely to persist and be retained (Astin, 1984, 1993).

Many student development scholars cite Astin’s Involvement Theory as a building block to better understanding how student decision making regarding time and efforts on campus affect academic success. For example, Kinzie et al. (2007) attributed tenets of involvement theory observed in the interactions between students and faculty as being instrumental to academic skill development, social connectedness, and leadership skills. Similarly, McGrath and Burd (2012) connected involvement theory and persistence: “all of these involvement behaviors point to relatively high levels of satisfaction with the institution and thus greater commitment, and as a result, less chance of student departure (p. 44).

For the military learner, the connection between student involvement and persistence serves as a reflection of the student’s overall institutional commitment, and if supported, can lessen the possibility of student departure. Astin’s (1984, 1993) framework also highlighted the importance of academic peer groups as a positive influence for persistence. In their research of military learners, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) highlighted the importance of peer group

relationships for military learners, and cited relationships as an essential element of their military experience that can be instrumental to their success on the college campus.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Expanding Astin's theoretical foundation, Tinto (1975, 1988) developed a series of cohesive models to expand our understanding of student persistence and provide a theoretical framework of student departure decisions. Tinto (1998) focused on two elements of student integration: social and academic. Tinto attributed collegiate persistence to the shared relationship between a student's academic ability and motivation with the social and academic components of the institution, indicating that the more positive the student-institution relationship match, the greater the student's commitment to degree completion and the greater likelihood of persistence (Tinto, 1998). Therefore, the relationship between social and academic engagement is fundamental to a student's decision to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution. Tinto's (1998) theory placed importance on campus relationships with faculty and peers and emphasized that the socialization process of students both academically and socially influences persistence. If assimilation does not occur, the student will lack institutional fit, negatively impacting collegiate persistence. For military learners, who often express feelings of isolation on campus, the application of Tinto's Student Departure Theory can assist higher education leaders in designing and implementing support services that foster higher levels of academic and social engagement.

Schlossberg's Theory of Student Transition

Schlossberg's (1981, 1989) theory on adult learners and transition and her work on meaning and mattering present frameworks applicable to military learners. Contained in Schlossberg's (1981) work are parallel elements between adult learners and military

undergraduates including delayed entry into the academy, vocational motivation, and heightened sense of isolation in the collegiate environment.

Schlossberg (1981) suggested the collegiate experience for the adult learner is dependent primarily on the student's readiness for transition and their life experiences prior to entering higher education. Outlining adult life events as an important indicator for a successful academic transition, the experiences of military learners meaningfully impact their ability to transition. While not referencing military learners, Schlossberg underscored the importance of institutional responses that support the academic success of adult learners. Schlossberg's model can be applied to the support services focused on military learners in their higher education transition (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011).

Schlossberg's work on mattering comprised an essential element in supporting a student's sense of belonging in higher education environments (Strayhorn, 2012). Schlossberg (1985) defined mattering as the feeling experienced by students on whether they are valued or respected by others on campus. Feelings of mattering are instrumental in a student's establishing a sense of belonging on campus, especially for the marginalized, such as students of color, first-generation and other distinctive cultural groups (Strayhorn, 2012).

Strayhorn's Model of College Students' Sense of Belonging

Much of the research published since 2008 by Strayhorn has examined elements supporting the sense of belonging of college students in higher education environments. Of particular interest in Strayhorn's research is the process by which marginalized student groups connect and transition onto the college campus. Since 2008, Strayhorn has conducted quantitative and qualitative research on Latino students, LGBT students, first-year students, first-generation students, Black males, graduate students and STEM students of color. His work

extends our understanding of the essential connection between marginalized student groups and the academy, providing higher education leadership with a greater knowledge of on-campus student connectivity. In the foreword of Strayhorn's (2012) book *College Students' Sense of Belonging*, researcher Sylvia Hurtado emphasized the importance of understanding how students build connections, sense of fit and community in higher education. Hurtado observed:

Not all student engagement activities foster sense of belong in the same way and most colleges have a variety of communities or "niches" where students may be able to find a feeling of community that coincides with an aspect of their multiple social identities (based on race/ethnicity, gender, LBGT identity, social class, religion/faith, or science/career identity). ...College students' sense of belonging is complex and can be fostered in many ways, and this book (Strayhorn) adds important new insights to a developing body of research on the topic (p.x).

Strayhorn (2012) framed sense of belonging as an essential "human need and motivation," (p. 4) that takes on amplified consequence in social contexts where students are at risk of experiencing marginalization and are predisposed to feeling disconnected and alienated. Building on qualitative and quantitative research with diverse groups of college students, Strayhorn (2012) identified sense of belonging as an essential element in the success of students and "college students stress the importance of social acceptance, support, community, connections, and respect to their own identity, wellbeing, and academic success" (p. 5). Creating a working definition of sense of belonging for higher education stakeholders, Strayhorn (2012) structured sense of belonging:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It is a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an effective response of behavior (p. 3).

Identifying core elements of sense of belonging, Strayhorn highlighted the significance of belonging for marginalized students on the college campus. Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of

belonging as a “basic human need,” (p. 18) whereby students fundamentally need to feel connected and acknowledged. Finding its origin in Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs, sense of belonging is a psychological necessity of college students especially as they transition to the college environment. “A college student’s need for belonging must be satisfied before any higher-order needs such as knowledge and self-actualization, which some would argue are the desired outcomes of a college education can be achieved” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 18).

Strayhorn’s (2012) work with marginalized student populations revealed the psychological necessity of mattering within the new campus culture. To excel academically, students need to feel identification and connection within the academy, two components of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging has the ability to determine behavior and can result in positive academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012). In his research with Latinos and students of color, two groups identified as marginalized on college campuses, Strayhorn (2012) found that the establishment of strong campus connections is particularly impactful for these students during times of transition and when student identities conflict with campus identities:

Students enter various social spaces associated with college life (e.g. classroom, department, club/organization, off-campus group), and this triggers their basic needs and drives behavior(s) to satisfy those needs. Satisfaction of physiological and safety needs gives way to belongingness needs (in college) and, should they be satisfied, individuals experience esteem and self-actualization needs. Deprivation of belongingness needs can lead to unhealthy or negative outcomes, prevent individuals from dealing with academic tasks at hand and thwart personal development (p. 125).

It is commonly accepted in higher education research that there is a relationship between student engagement and activities and achievement of academic success (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975, 1998; Strayhorn, 2012). Furthering this body of research, Strayhorn (2012) investigated the impact of student involvement (engagement) in campus organizations and work experiences on the sense of belonging and connectedness of students to their institution. Building on the work

of Astin (1999), student involvement is identified as both the academic and social activities students engage in, including “working on campus, living on campus, engaging with peers, being a member of clubs and socializing with faculty” (p. 108). Considering engagement as the time and effort students devote to both academic and social activities, Strayhorn (2012) observed a beneficial relationship between a student’s sense of belonging and student engagement. Drawing upon the research gained from past studies and an analysis of national survey data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), Strayhorn (2012) identified a statistically significant correlation between student involvement in campus social and academic activities and perceived sense of belonging on campus. Following his data analysis, Strayhorn (2012) observed:

Not only do students benefit in terms of sense of belonging when they engage their peers in educationally purposeful ways, but students may also derive a sense of belonging from socializing with faculty members outside of class. Socializing with faculty encompasses a variety of activities and experiences, ranging from mere conversation over coffee to attending a social gathering at their home (p. 111-113).

Strayhorn (2012) incorporated elements of Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure as foundational to establishment of a sense of belonging on campus. Strayhorn’s research on engagement and involvement also extends to a review of the qualitative responses included in past studies of marginalized student groups. Based on this review, he observed four components of the supportive relationship between involvement and sense of belonging: (1) connections between other students with similar interests, (2) socialization to campus culture, (3) confirmation of student identity and interests, and (4) affirmation of mattering on campus (Strayhorn, 2012).

In an attempt to provide an illustration to explain the sense of belonging process experienced by a college student, Strayhorn (2012) visualized an intersection between sense of belonging, self-actualization, esteem, safety, and physiological needs within the social spaces

and contexts experienced in the classroom, residence hall, academic department, and campus at large producing both positive outcomes and negative outcome for students. Strayhorn (2012) furthered his conceptualization of sense of belonging by placing importance on the encounters students experience with social and academic spaces and contexts on campus. These encounters ultimately result in high or low connectivity and sense of belonging on campus. Strayhorn's model is depicted in Figure 1.

Summary

The research reviewed in the previous sections demonstrates the complex issues surrounding the academic success of military learners in today's academy. Their challenges are noteworthy and span from the entry to the campus to degree attainment. The experiences of military learners encompass many facets of the campus community and fit many of the attributes associated with what we know about marginalized student populations and their collegiate outcomes. Building on the theoretical framework of Strayhorn's (2012) sense-of-belonging research on marginalized student groups, the study examines the sense of belonging of military learners in higher education. Recognizing the contribution of current research on military learners, we are just beginning to uncover intersections where beneficial support services can be implemented. There remains much to be studied regarding the rising population of military learners on our campuses.

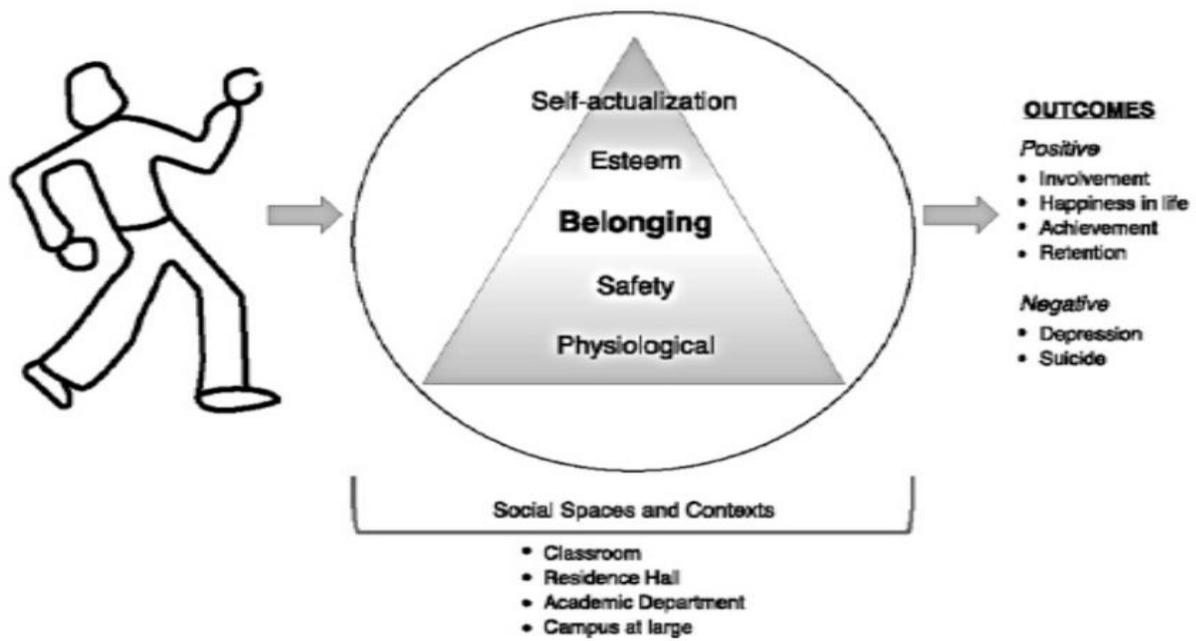


Figure 1. Strayhorn's (2012) Hypothesized Model of sense of belonging.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to assist in understanding the sense of belonging and engagement experiences of military learners in higher education. Specifically, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the encounters which impact military learners and to assist in identifying beneficial connections provided by academic employment. Incorporating Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging as a framework, this study explores the impact of academic employment as a means of fostering a deeper sense of belonging and engagement on campus. This chapter describes the methods and procedures employed in the study, including research questions, research design, research setting, participants, and interview protocol. In addition, validity, data collection, data analysis, threats to validity and delimitations and limitations are presented.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study examines the relationship of academic employment of military learners as tutors and their perceived sense of belonging and engagement utilizing Strayhorn's (2012) Model of Sense of Belonging. This qualitative study extends Strayhorn's work to military learners, who possess many similar learner characteristics identified in Strayhorn's previously studied marginalized student populations. These student populations include students of color, Latinos, first-generation college students, and LGBT students.

This study explores how military learners employed as tutors experience and perceive sense of belonging and engagement in post-secondary education institutions. Furthermore, this study seeks to illuminate the experiences and influences that impact the perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in higher education. This study explores

how the academic employment of military learners as tutors affects their sense of belonging and engagement practices in college. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?
2. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?
3. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?
4. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Research Design

A qualitative research approach is appropriate and is used to examine themes and experiences that impact the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners. Employing a qualitative research approach is substantiated by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) work in constructivism, highlighting qualitative research methods in allowing knowledge to be formulated from the investigator's interpretations of the experiences and social interactions of the participants in this study. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined qualitative research as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 11). Qualitative research methods are suitable for research designed to explore and promote greater understanding regarding an experience for which limited research is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Quantitative research methods are not always able to portray the effects of interactions that take place in social environments, while qualitative research can address the multifaceted nature of effect and social interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

To increase our understanding of the sense of belonging and engagement experiences of military learners employed as tutors, a qualitative research approach with self-contained focus groups was employed. Self-contained focus groups consist of focus group sessions that are the only source of data collection in a qualitative study (Morgan, 1997). In its most simplistic definition, focus groups are a collective dialogue directed on a specific subject matter for the purpose of research (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2009). Morgan (1997) defined self-contained focus groups as a method of interviewing with several participants at one time and highlighted the interaction that occurs between the participants. Self-contained focus groups “reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not be accessible without group interaction” (Morgan, 1997, p. 20). Rabiee (2004) underscored the suitability of focus groups to develop a deeper understanding of values, impressions, attitudes and experiences of people. Similarly, Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981) defined focus groups as a dialogue in which a small group of participants discuss the central themes of the research facilitated by a focus group moderator.

The focus group approach is particularly appropriate for a qualitative study regarding military learners who enter higher education with a shared military culture and mindset. Focus groups allow investigators to gain in-depth knowledge from participants who share similar life experiences and possess similar cultural backgrounds (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981; Morgan, 1997). The use of focus groups facilitated a venue for participants to share and interact within the research process and allowed for a richer understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the participants (Gill et al., 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups nurture deeper understanding and meaning from the group’s interactions that may be lost in individual interviews and allow investigators to adopt the role as interpreters, gathering stories and

experiences to gain new knowledge through the investigation process (Creswell, 2012; Morgan, 1997; Stake, 1995).

Site

This study was conducted at one institution in the North Carolina college system, East Carolina University (ECU). East Carolina University is a public four-year coeducational research institution located in the Eastern North Carolina region of the United States and offers more than 100 undergraduate degrees (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). Founded in 1907, the university is the third largest in the University of North Carolina higher education system (U.S. News and World Report, 2016). According to the ECU Fact Book (2016) university campus-based enrollment was 21,983 students for fall 2016 of the 2016-17 academic year (ECU Fact Book, 2016).

East Carolina University received a 2016 designation as a “Best for Vets” college and the 2016 “Military Friendly School” designation making it an ideal study location (Boyd, 2017). ECU enrolls a high percentage of military learners due to its close proximity to eight military facilities in the surrounding region. Enrollments of military learners reached 5 percent of student enrollment in fall 2016, totaling approximately 1,400 military learners (Boyd, 2017; ECU Fact Book, 2016).

On the ECU campus, the centralized learning center, the Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC), has purposely recruited and hired military learners as tutors. Under the PASC’s *Green Team Project* approximately 35 military learners have been employed as tutors since 2013 (Norwood, 2017).

Data collection occurred in a conference room adjacent to ECU’s campus learning center where the participants serve or have served as tutors. This room is often used for employee

training and meetings and was a familiar setting for the participants. I selected the conference room for the focus groups because it was easily accessible and located on the main campus of East Carolina University. The conference room location allowed for familiarity and privacy and prevented interruptions to focus group sessions. Morgan (1997) provided the following best practices for selecting a location for a focus group session: “the site must balance the needs of participants and the needs of the researcher; there is little use for sites where participants will not be comfortable or where it is not possible to record the session” (p. 54). Patton (1990) suggested that natural settings are an important facet of qualitative studies. Natural settings hold meaning for the participants, allow participants to feel comfortable and reduce any anxiety associated with the research process (Patton, 1990).

Participants

Participants for this study were purposely selected (Morgan, 1997) and convenience sampled (Morgan, 1997), using only one source to identify and recruit participants (Morgan, 1997). I identified participants from the tutoring staff employment records of ECU’s campus learning center between the years of 2013 to 2017. From these records, I invited participants who met both inclusion criteria: (1) is currently or has been enrolled as a military learner at East Carolina University, and (2) is currently or has been employed as a tutor at the campus learning center between the years of 2013 and 2017. Participants selected represented different military affiliations as soldiers in the United States Armed Forces including the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marines. The participants were derived from different military affiliations such as active ROTC, active duty, or veteran status. The participants varied in age but all served as undergraduate student tutors and had been employed as tutors in the campus learning center.

Participants in the study were not paid for their involvement; however, those who completed a focus group session were given a fifteen-dollar gift card to Sheetz for their participation.

The overall study included 13 participants in one of three focus groups sessions. To meet this threshold, I contacted 26 military learners to participate in the study. The number of participants in a focus group is a significant consideration so that each participant has sufficient opportunities to share and so that effective communication and interaction can be facilitated (Gill et al., 2008; Morgan, 1997). Each of the three focus group sessions consisted of a minimum of four participants and a maximum of eight participants. Morgan (1997), Gill et al. (2008), and Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981) explained that the ideal size for a focus group is up to eight research participants, thus fostering opportunity for communication and group interaction.

Some of the participants I recruited were familiar with each other and some are currently working together as tutors at the campus learning center. Although some qualitative investigators discourage the use of participants who know each other, Kitzinger (1995) found recruiting familiarized participants effective in facilitating group discussions with participants who share a common culture similar to the military learners in this study. In her work in the AIDS Media Research Project, Kitzinger (1994) conducted focus groups with participants belonging to pre-existing groups who knew each other prior to the focus group session. Kitzinger (1994) found that by including participants who knew each other the investigators “were sometimes able to tap into *fragments* of interactions which approximated to natural occurring data” (p. 105), and their inclusion provided a view of the social context shared by the participants. Similarly, Asbury (1995) recommended that participants share similar characteristics such as culture, age, status, or backgrounds in order to encourage a heightened exchange of ideas.

Interview Protocol.

I designed a 12-question interview protocol to obtain narrative data from focus group participants (see Appendix D). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions intended to explore influences associated with the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners. The interview protocol guided the progression of the focus group, allowed the moderator to follow the same order of questions, and provided structure to the focus group session (Morgan, 1997). Structure is gained by using an interview protocol and is beneficial to conducting a focus group session in three primary ways: (1) it organizes the discussion process, (2) it allows for similarity in questions and flow, and (3) it allows for increased consistency between data collected in each session (Morgan, 1997).

The focus group approach followed in this study was founded from the work of Morgan (1997) and Gill et al. (2008), adhering to best practices in procedure processes for reliable data collection. A detailed interview protocol was followed to ensure consistent procedures for each focus group session. The interview protocol included the following steps:

1. Participant welcome.
2. Sharing an overview of the research process and roles of investigator and co-investigator.
3. Participant introductions.
4. Conducting the session as outlined in interview protocol.
5. Asking additional probing questions if needed.
6. Providing an outline of member checking processes.
7. Concluding the focus group session.

I designed the interview protocol for the study (see Appendix D) to adhere to best practices for conducting a structured focus group approach. Merriam (1998) suggested investigators pay attention to the data collection process by asking pertinent questions, using probing questions, employing an interview protocol, and paying careful attention to the recording and evaluation of collected data. Gill et al. (2008) suggested the number of questions included in the focus group protocol should be less than 12, allowing the investigator to probe beyond the protocol questions and facilitate an opportunity for deeper understanding. Qualitative researchers Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981) recommended the interview protocol be prepared prior to focus group sessions and used to maintain a consistent process of data collection. Finally, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) advised session questions should progress from broad to specific and, where appropriate, allow for the focus group moderator to probe further for additional clarity.

I designed the interview protocol questions from best practices in focus group research. Limiting the protocol to 12 questions allowed for the exploration of research themes while also addressing the need for time restraints in conducting 60- to 90-minute session (Morgan, 1997). The interview protocol began with two ice breaker questions. First, the participants were asked to introduce themselves and share their name, major, military affiliation, and subjects they tutor. Second, the participants were asked, “What motivated you to pursue a college education at East Carolina University?” Icebreaker questions allowed the participants to become more familiar with each other. Morgan (1997) recommended the inclusion of an ice-breaker question when designing protocols, finding the inclusion helpful in setting the “mood” for the group (p. 49). The next two questions, “What does it mean to be a military connected student?” and “How has your military connection impacted your experience as a student at ECU?” functioned as discussion-starter questions designed to begin the discussion and function as the introduction to the research

themes. Morgan (1997) advised the use of an easily answered discussion-starter question to encourage the involvement of all participants. “Discussion-starter questions that encourage opening statements are a way of getting everyone on record with their different experiences and opinions before consensus emerges” (Morgan, 1997, p. 50).

Questions included in the study’s interview protocol explored the experiences and perceptions of engagement and sense of belonging of the participants. The protocol was constructed using probing questions (Patton, 1980) that began in a less structured manner, allowing for unrestricted responses and shifts to more structured questions regarding the research themes of the study (Morgan, 1997). Morgan (1997) defined this questioning process as the “funnel strategy” which allows for participants to share their unique experiences with the group while still exploring the study’s research questions. Probing questions are a useful strategy allowing the investigator to encourage participants to contribute meaningful answers that foster deeper understanding (Patton, 1980). The final question in the protocol, “Is there anything you would like to share about your experiences as a student we have not talked about,” functioned as a closing question and allowed each participant to interject additional comments to the group discussion. Morgan (1997) emphasized the useful function that closing questions play in focus group sessions because they allow participants to “make a contribution that he or she has been holding back from the open discussion” (p. 51).

Recruitment Procedures

I submitted all research documents to East Carolina University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted IRB approval prior to the start of the study. I identified participants from ECU’s campus learning center’s staff employment records during the years 2013 to 2017. From these records, participants were identified who met both inclusion criteria: (1) is currently

or has been enrolled as a military learner at East Carolina University between the years of 2013 to 2017, and (2) is currently or has been employed as a tutor at the campus learning center between the years of 2013 to 2017.

I invited military learners who are currently or have been employed as tutors to participate, using one or more of the following methods: (1) for those currently employed, I invited participants in person, introducing the study and requesting their participation in a focus group session, (2) for those who are not currently employed, I sent an email correspondence inviting the military learner to participate in the study (see Appendix E), and (3) if the participant did not respond to the email invitation, I initiated a phone contact inviting the participant to join the study (see Appendix F). Upon accepting the invitation to join the study, I offered participants a choice of one of three scheduled focus group sessions. Participants were offered choices in scheduling until an eight-participant threshold was met. After scheduling participants in a focus group session, I offered participants the remaining session options. I repeated this process until all three focus group sessions were filled. One week prior to the scheduled focus group, I sent an email reminder to each participant of the upcoming focus group session (see Appendix G). One day prior to the scheduled focus group session, I sent an additional reminder email (see Appendix G). The day of the focus group session, I contacted the participant by phone (see Appendix G).

Data Collection

The focus group was the process in which data were collected in this study. Prior to conducting each focus group session, participants completed two documents: (1) the informed consent document, and (2) a demographic survey (see Appendices B & C). The demographic survey consisted of 16 demographic questions.

With the assistance of a moderator, I conducted three focus group sessions with four to eight participants so that the opportunity to share experiences and interaction was encouraged. Seeking to better understand the perceptions, experiences, and viewpoints of military learners, narrative data were collected following an interview protocol used during each focus group session. The interview protocol questions explored the perceptions and experiences regarding the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners who are employed as tutors.

Focus Group Procedures

Participants arrived 10 minutes prior to the scheduled time for the focus group. I reviewed the informed consent document on an individual basis with each participant. After signing the informed consent document, I provided each participant a copy of their signed informed consent document and invited them to enter the focus group session room. In the session room, I gave participants a demographic survey to complete. Once all the demographic surveys were completed, the focus group session began following the interview protocol as outlined in Appendix D. I welcomed the participants to the focus group session and introduced Mr. Dexter Sharp, the moderator for the focus group sessions. During the focus group session, I remained in the room as an observer, taking field notes and audio recording the responses while Mr. Sharp moderated the 60- to 90-minute session.

Mr. Sharp conducted the focus group session following the interview protocol and encouraged communication by all participants. I audio recorded the focus group session by using two digital recorders placed on the conference table in front of the participants. In addition to audio recording focus group sessions, the moderator and I kept hand-written notes. At the conclusion of the focus group session, I reviewed the process of member checking with the participants and highlighted the importance of transcription review and participant feedback.

Immediately following the conclusion of each focus group session, the moderator and I composed observational data and field notes independent of one another, then shared our notes and discussed the session. Lofland and Lofland (1984) recommend writing notes along with audio recording as it serves as a memory aid when notes are transcribed. Morgan and Krueger (1998) highlighted the importance of debriefing processes, allowing the opportunity for clarification and comparison of the data collected in focus group sessions.

I arranged for a transcription of the focus group from the audio recording devices used in the session. Following the completion of focus group transcriptions, I emailed participants, offered them the opportunity for member checking and provided them the chance to review the focus group transcription for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I encouraged participants to email their feedback and three participants provided transcription feedback. I noted their feedback in the transcription data. At the conclusion of the study, I offered participants a copy of the study's outcome for their personal review.

I audio recorded the focus group, observed the session, and took detailed notes on the non-verbal communication between participants. The moderator encouraged all participants to engage and communicate within the session. The inclusion of the moderator as a co-investigator not only allowed for triangulation for the study validity but fostered the essential group interaction that is the hallmark of a successful focus group session (Ellis, Bochner, Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Gill et al. (2008) highlighted the important role the moderator plays in conducting successful focus group sessions. Moderators have the ability to set a relaxed and open tone to the group session, are instrumental in asking follow-up questions to facilitate group discussion and are tasked with ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to contribute (Gill et al., 2008).

Transcription Process

All information provided in the demographic survey remained confidential and is only reported in aggregate formats. Audio recordings of the focus group session were transcribed verbatim within four weeks of the focus group session. Prior to transcription, I assigned each participant a participant identifier, which was utilized during the transcription and analysis process. A log of participants' real names and participant identifiers was kept in a separate locked filing cabinet in my private office so that the identification of the participants was kept highly confidential and did not impact the analysis process. I assigned participant identifiers according to the focus group session. Participant identifiers assigned consist of a letter (A, B or C) used to indicate the focus group session followed by a numerical identifier (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5). Focus group recordings were downloaded and archived on the university server until the participants had the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. Transcriptions were stored on a dedicated university server, password protected and encrypted for safekeeping. All files were labeled with the pseudonym assigned so that the identification of the participants was protected. Only I have access to the logs kept which connect individual participants with their corresponding files.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced after focus group sessions were held, transcriptions completed, and member checking concluded. Methodical analysis of the transcripts is essential in qualitative studies (Gill et al., 2008). Focus group transcripts demand a different approach than individual interviews because the context of group dynamics and discussion must be considered as the investigator analyzes the data collected (Gill et al., 2008). "The uniqueness of a focus group is the ability to generate data on the synergy of the group interaction" (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656).

I consolidated, interpreted, and analyzed the data collected. By placing data into meaningful and logical categories, I employed analytic processes to identify patterns and common sequences shared by the study participants (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). Employing a conventional content analysis research technique, my analysis process focused on the elements of participant communication. I paid attention to the context and meanings behind responses shared in the focus group sessions. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggested the conventional content analysis process in qualitative research is appropriate when there is limited literature available. Highlighting the advantage of employing the conventional content analysis process, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) observe its ability to facilitate a flow of categories from the data rather than using predetermined classifications. This is a particularly beneficial approach when the data collection originates from interviews or focus groups (Rabiee, 2004).

I employed a five-step process of conventional content analysis which originated from the works of Hsieh and Shannon (2005), Datt (2016), Morgan (1997), Rabiee (2004) and Miles and Hubermann (1994). The five-step process included the following: (1) data preparation and transcription review, (2) identification of unit themes and starter codes, (3) investigator notations and review to develop coding schemes and categories, (4) identification of emergent codes, and (5) definition and revision of codes. Table 3 outlines the data analysis process.

Data Preparation and Transcription Review

My first step of data analysis began with reviewing the transcription and field notes to gain insight into the entirety of focus group discussions. Rabiee (2004) underscored the importance of reviewing transcripts and reflecting on the field notes and observations gathered during the focus group process. The review procedure facilitated the identification of context in the communications shared by focus group participants.

Table 3

Content Analysis Process

Step	Process	Description	Source
Step 1	Preparation of data and review	Data transcription Observations and field notes recorded Initial transcription review	Rabiee (2004) Datt (2016)
Step 2	Definition of unit or themes of analysis	Classifying content into themes and starter codes	Miles & Hubermann (1994) Hsieh & Shannon (2005)
Step 3	Development of categories and coding scheme	Using investigator notations in identifying codes	Miles & Hubermann (1994)
Step 4	Identification of emergent codes	Identification of common patterns and frequency of use and build off of identified codes	Hsieh & Shannon (2005) Morgan (1997) Miles & Hubermann (1994)
Step 5	Code definition, reexamination and revision	Review and reexamine coding patterns, frequency, and noting what is emphasized in all focus group sessions	Hsieh & Shannon (2005) Miles & Hubermann (1994) Morgan (1997)

Identification of Unit Themes and Starter Codes

I reviewed each transcription and noted starter codes from the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested the next step of analysis is to read the data collected word-by-word to develop starter codes. Codes are the “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). The coding process began by underlining words from the transcriptions that described key thoughts or concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Investigator Notations and Coding Schemes

In my next step of analysis, I made notations and wrote thoughts in the text margins. I identified observations and noted impressions by hand regarding the sessions in the transcription text. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasized the helpful nature investigator notations play in later coding and analysis processes.

Identification of Emergent Codes

I reviewed the transcriptions and identified additional emergent codes, paying careful attention to frequency of use and patterns in the data. Emergent codes originated from this review process built upon original identified coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Miles and Huberman (1994) described this step as the process of “sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences” (p. 9). When interpreting focus group data, it is essential that the investigator delineate between what is shared during a group discussion from what are the most important elements discussed that pertain to the research study. Morgan (1997) suggested paying careful attention to the frequency and length of discussion surrounding specific topics shared in each focus group session both from the view of

an individual session as well as in the composite of all three sessions. When interpreting focus group data, Morgan (1997) highlighted:

“Three basic factors that influence how much emphasis a given topic should receive: how many groups mentioned the topic, and how many people within each of these groups mentioned the topic, and how much energy and enthusiasm the topic generated among the participants” (p. 63).

Definition and Revision of Codes

Following initial data coding, I defined and re-examined coding themes, and identified larger descriptive details to gain a deeper understanding of the participants. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) recommended code definitions as an important preparation process for analysis and suggest investigators should identify and define the relationships between the codes used in the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) highlighted revising codes as an essential step in the analysis process, noting that “codes will change and develop” (p. 61) as the analysis progresses. In this analysis step, new codes may emerge that represent more than one key idea or concept. These emergent codes are employed to better organize and assemble the data into meaningful classifications and represent the identification of new concepts (Stemler, 2001). It is important to note that I completed the coding and recoding process when the codes appeared saturated and I identified any significant patterns that emerged from the transcriptions. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that saturation occurs when the analysis process appears to uncover no new themes or concepts.

Creswell (1998) highlighted the unique nature of focus group data analysis. Focus group data relies on language choice, patterns, and themes that emerge from the participant’s discussion, and investigators must employ specific methods to properly synthesize and analyze transcripts (Creswell, 1998). While analyzing the data collected in the study, I identified topics and themes that were emphasized across all the focus group sessions. This process is known as

“group to group validation” and is an important tool in analyzing focus group data (Morgan, 1997).

To assist in the analytic process outlined, computer research software was utilized. Upon the completion of each focus group session, I downloaded the transcriptions using the qualitative research software program NVivo. All transcripts and NVivo analysis were stored on the university’s encrypted server and were password protected. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) recommended the use of coding software in order to maintain consistency when analyzing data and coding focus group transcriptions. The NVivo software allows investigators to code themes, analyze, and interpret the data collected. Using NVivo, I conducted text analysis and theme coding directly from the focus group transcriptions. In addition, I used hand written notations and coding of text in the analysis process.

Reliability

Trustworthiness of the research was established through method, investigator, and analysis triangulation. Richie (2003) described triangulation as “the use of different methods and sources to check the integrity of, or extend, inferences drawn from the data” (p. 66). Creswell (2013) emphasized the role process strategies play in the reliability of the research process.

Method triangulation consists of using varied approaches to data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). In this study, I achieved triangulation through the field notation process, audio recordings, documentation of observation notes, and construction of precise transcripts following each focus group session. According to Decrop (1999) method triangulation is achieved when investigators utilize transcriptions, observations, and field notes to add context to the focus group transcripts. By observing non-verbal behaviors and communication elements, field notes can be instrumental to adding context to the data collected.

Investigator triangulation was achieved through the process of “member checking” (Creswell, 2013; Decrop, 1999). I sent focus group transcriptions to all participants by email and received feedback from three participants regarding the transcriptions. Lincoln and Guba (1995) described member checking as the process in which transcripts are provided to participants so that they can comment on the accuracy of the data gathered. By soliciting participant feedback, member checking enhances the credibility of the data analysis and decrease the opportunity for investigator bias.

This study utilized both an investigator and moderator to observe and conduct focus group sessions. The focus group moderator aided in decreasing investigator bias in data collection and analysis (Denzin, 1970). I observed and audio recorded focus group sessions and the moderator facilitated sessions following the same interview protocol, time frame, and setting. Both the moderator and I recorded hand written notes, prepared field notes, noted observations of nonverbal communication, and reviewed transcriptions using session notes. The inclusion of the moderator in these processes increased the validity of the research design (Creswell, 2013).

I followed consistent procedures in conducting the study. Creswell (2013) highlighted procedural consistency as a foundation of qualitative research reliability. The interview protocol (see Appendix D) was carefully followed so that all sessions were conducted in a similar manner. Adhering to the three types of reliability recommended by Kirk and Miller (1986), the study employed: (1) the same process to ensure the degree of measurement is consistent, (2) repeated similar processes to safeguard the stability of measurement over time, and (3) used similar processes within a specific time period.

Threats to Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of a qualitative study, researchers should utilize varied techniques to validate that the research methods used and findings are trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Threats to validity are lessened by employing disciplined research methods including following specific research protocols and procedures (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). To lessen the threat of investigator and participant bias, I followed precise research protocols in data collection and analysis. The study strictly adhered to the interview protocol, data collection procedures, and coding and analytic processes outlined in this chapter. Furthering our understanding of validity, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) summarized three threats to qualitative research: (1) data collection, (2) data analysis, and (3) data interpretation. Investigator bias occurs when the investigator subconsciously conveys personal beliefs and preferences to the study participants (Merriam, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). It is important to acknowledge the prospect of research bias as a limitation in the study. In considering potential bias in qualitative research, Merriam (1998) observes:

The researcher brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this type of study is yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own (p. 22).

Boyce and Neale (2006) suggested the nature of the focus groups presented in this study might be prone to investigator and participant bias. Participants may desire to “prove” a program or theory so their interview responses may be biased (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Likewise, the investigator may be biased in the analysis process desiring the session responses to support their claims. Boyce and Neale (2006) recommended investigators develop an interview protocol which provides “the rules” that direct focus group process and advocate for verifying transcribed data with participants in order to increase reliability in the data collection process.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study has several delimitations and limitations that should be considered when relating the findings to a larger context. First, the study covers only one institution, lessening the scope of the study. Second, the participants were employed in only one category of academic employment as tutors, while there remain many other academic support positions on campus such as lab supervisors, and undergraduate teaching and research assistants. Third, the population of military learners studied was limited in size, thus decreasing the generalization to the larger undergraduate population. In addition, the roles of the investigator and co-investigator need to be acknowledged. I serve as the current director and the moderator is the assistant director of the campus learning center that employs the participants in this study. Although I am not the direct supervisor of the participants, I am often involved in their hiring and training. The moderator serves as the supervisor of the participants who are currently employed in this study. Although this can be considered a limitation of investigator bias, the inclusion of investigators that are familiar to the participants enhanced the focus group process (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). Some qualitative investigators oppose the use of focus group participants who know each other, Kitzinger (1995) recommended participant familiarity in focus groups that involve participants with distinct cultural identities. Due to the distinct nature of the military experience and cultural barriers that military learners bring to higher education, familiarity with the investigator and moderator heightened the communication and interaction between participants in the focus group sessions.

Summary

The purpose of this work is two-fold. First, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of military learners, recognizing the impact of their growing enrollment in higher education

institutions. Second, the study intends to expand our conceptions of military learners and encourage future research regarding academic employment with other marginalized student groups.

Educational researchers observe differences in the way military learners and their non-military peers encounter and experience institutions of higher education. There remains a gap in our understanding of engagement and sense of belonging of military learners enrolled in post-secondary education. This study intends to extend our knowledge of the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners. By examining connections between academic employment, sense of belonging, and engagement; the study explores the ways military learners perceive and experience higher education environments.

Focus group questions intended to illuminate the experiences and influences that impact the perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in higher education. The responses provided by the military learners in the study were analyzed and the central themes that emerged are supported by the literature and are aligned with the findings of other scholars. A discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Utilizing the College Student Sense of Belonging Model developed by Strayhorn (2012), this study investigates the sense of belonging experienced by military learners and the potential impact academic employment has by cultivating key engagement practices that support their academic success. Furthermore, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the relationship among academic employment, sense of belonging and engagement of military learners attending four-year colleges and universities.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of three focus group sessions conducted with collegiate military learners who were employed as tutors. In addition, the chapter reviews participant demographic data, the data collection and analysis procedures used to conduct the study, as well as a summary of the study findings. Four research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?
2. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?
3. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?
4. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Data Collection Process

After receiving IRB approval, I conducted three focus group sessions during the course of this study. Focus groups A and B had four participants each, and focus group C had five participants. The focus group sessions were facilitated by a moderator. As the primary investigator, I remained in the role of an observer. Focus groups were held in a conference room adjacent to the campus learning center and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

The participants were provided a light meal in appreciation of their involvement, and each participant was given a fifteen-dollar gift card to Sheetz at the end of the focus group session. I audio recorded the focus group sessions with two devices placed in the center of the conference table, and the moderator and I recorded hand-written notes during the session. A 16-question demographic survey was provided to participants at the beginning of each of the three focus groups. Following the completion of the demographic survey, the focus group was conducted adhering to the interview protocol. I provided digital audio recordings from all three focus groups to an outside transcriber for transcription. The transcriber was given participant identifier codes to use so that only I knew the identities of the participants. Upon completion of the transcription, I reviewed the transcripts and entered the documents into NVivo for coding and analysis.

Demographic survey questions were completed and referenced with the employment records maintained at the campus learning center. Tutor training levels and length of employment data were noted before participants were assigned a participant identifier. Demographic information from the survey was recorded into a Qualtrics survey system and classified by the participant identifier assigned (rather than by the participants' real names). Participant identifiers used to identify the military learners consist of a letter (A, B or C) to

indicate the focus group session, followed by a numerical identifier (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5). As the investigator, I analyzed the data entered and compiled the data into a meaningful structure. Percentages and numbers were assigned when applicable.

Demographic Data

Twenty-six military learners employed as tutors between the years of 2013 and 2017 were identified from the employment records of the East Carolina University's learning center. I invited identified military learners to participate in one of three focus group sessions. An invitation email to participate was sent to all 26 students, and all responded to the inquiry. Thirteen military learners (50%) agreed to participate. Participants who declined to take part in the study provided the following reasons: deployment, military relocation out of state, and educational demands that prevented participation. At the beginning of each focus group, I requested participants to complete a demographic survey that consisted of 16 questions. All 13 participants (100%) completed the demographic survey (see Appendix C).

Participant Demographic Profile

This study consisted of 13 participants in three focus group sessions. Four participants attended Focus Group A, four participants attended Focus Group B, and five participants attended Focus Group C. All participants identified their gender as male. Nine participants (69.2%) identified their race as white/non-Hispanic, one participant (7.7%) identified as African American/Black, two participants (15.3%) identified as Hispanic, and one participant (7.7%) identified as Multi-racial. Of the 13 participants, eight identified their age as 18 to 25 years of age (61.5%), three identified as 26 to 30 years of age (23.0%), and two identified their age as 30 or older (15.3%). Table 4 states a summary of participant demographics.

Table 4

Participant Demographic Profile Summary

Participant Identifier	Ethnicity	Age
A1	White/Non-Hispanic	30 and older
A2	Hispanic	18 to 25
A3	White/Non-Hispanic	18 to 25
A4	Multi-racial	26 to 30
B1	White/Non-Hispanic	18 to 25
B2	White/Non-Hispanic	18 to 25
B3	White/Non-Hispanic	18 to 25
B4	African American/Black	18 to 25
C1	White/Non-Hispanic	30 and older
C2	Hispanic	18 to 25
C3	White/Non-Hispanic	26 to 30
C4	White/Non-Hispanic	18 to 25
C5	White/Non-Hispanic	26 to 30

Note. Participants were assigned codes based on their focus group attendance.

Participant Military Service Profile

The 13 participants reported different military affiliations and service experiences. Two participants (15.3%) identified their military connection as active ROTC member, five participants (38.4%) identified their military connection as veteran/separated from service, five participants (38.4%) identified their military connection as active National Guard or Reserves, and one participant (7.6%) identified his military connection as both active National Guard or Reserves and active ROTC member. Of the 13 participants, six participants (42.8%) identified as Army, one participant (7.1%) identified as Navy, two participants (14.2%) identified as Air Force, and five participants (35.7%) identified as the Marine Corps. As referenced in Table 4 below, the participants were asked to identify any deployment experiences during their military service. Of the thirteen participants in this study, eight participants (61.5%) had never been deployed during their military service and five participants (38.4%) reported at least one deployment during their military service. Table 5 outlines military profile summary for military service profiles, affiliation, and deployment experiences.

Participant Student Profile

Of the 13 participants in this study, five participants (38.4%) identified their current classification as junior, five participants (38.4%) identified their current classification as senior, and three participants (23.0%) identified their current classification as graduate student. Four participants (30.7%) indicated that they were transfer students from community colleges before attending East Carolina University, and nine participants (69.2%) reported having only attended East Carolina University and having entered the university as freshmen. Five participants (38.4%) indicated their major program of study as Physics, one participant (7.7%) indicated his major program of study as Sociology, one participant (7.7%) indicated his major program of

Table 5

Participant Military Profile Summary

Participant Identifier	Military Service	Branch	Deployment	Times and Location
A1	Veteran	Marines	Yes	1x, Iraq
A2	Active ROTC member	Army	No	
A3	Active National Guard or Reserves	Marines	No	
A4	Veteran	Marines	Yes	1x Iraq
B1	Active ROTC member	Air Force	No	
B2	Active Nat. Guard /Reserves & ROTC	Army	No	
B3	Active National Guard or Reserves	Army	No	
B4	Active National Guard or Reserves	Army	No	
C1	Veteran	Marines	Yes	2x Japan & Thailand
C2	Veteran	Army	No	
C3	Veteran	Navy	Yes	1x, at sea
C4	Active National Guard or Reserves	Army	No	
C5	Active National Guard or Reserves	Air Force/ Marines	Yes	1x Afghanistan

Note. Participants were assigned codes based on their focus group attendance.

study as Biology, one participant (7.7%) indicated his major program of study as Engineering, one participant (7.7%) indicated his major program of study as Psychology, two participants (15.3%) indicated their major program of study as Nursing, and two participants (15.3%) indicated their major program of study as Business. Of the 13 participants, nine participants (69.2%) indicated using G.I. Bill educational benefits to attend college, seven participants (53.8%) indicated they were actively using G.I. Bill educational benefits at East Carolina University, and four participants (30.7%) indicated having not used any G.I. Bill educational benefits to attend an institution of higher education. Table 6 outlines a summary of participant student profile.

Participant Employment Profile

Participant employment as tutors ranged from the spring semester of 2013 to the spring semester of 2017. As indicated in Table 7, seven participants (53.8%) were employed as tutors two to four years. Three participants (23.0%) have worked one year, and one participant (7.7%) was completing his first semester of employment. All 13 participants (100%) were first employed as tutors while an undergraduate student, and two of the participants (11.7%) began in the role of peer-volunteer tutor before working as a paid tutor in the learning center. Of the 13 participants, two participants (15.3%) started as peer volunteer tutors, eleven participants (82.6%) served as daytime tutors, and four participants (30.7%) served as lead tutors in their subject areas. It is important to note that some participants served in more than one tutor role at the learning center. Table 7 outlines a participant employment profile summary.

Table 6

Participant Student Profile Summary

Participant Identifier	Current ECU Status	Community College	1 st Semester Status	Major Program of Study
A1	Graduate	Yes	Transfer	Psychology
A2	Junior	No	Freshman	Nursing
A3	Senior	No	Freshman	Accounting
A4	Senior	Yes	Transfer	Physics & Math
B1	Senior	No	Freshman	Physics
B2	Senior	No	Freshman	Nursing
B3	Junior	No	Freshman	Finance-Business
B4	Junior	No	Freshman	Engineering
C1	Graduate	Yes	Transfer	Applied Physics
C2	Senior	No	Freshman	Physics
C3	Junior	Yes	Transfer	Physics/Chemistry
C4	Junior	No	Freshman	Biology
C5	Graduate	No	Freshman	Sociology

Note. Participants were assigned codes based on their focus group attendance.

Table 7

Participant Employment Profile Summary

Participant Identifier	First Semester	Tutor Roles
A1	Spring 2014	Daytime Tutor
A2	Fall 2015	Daytime Tutor
A3	Spring 2017	Daytime Tutor
A4	Fall 2015	Lead Tutor
B1	Fall 2015	Daytime Tutor
B2	Fall 2014	Peer Tutor /Daytime Tutor
B3	Fall 2016	Daytime Tutor
B4	Spring 2014	Daytime Tutor
C1	Spring 2012	Peer Tutor /Lead Tutor
C2	Summer 2016	Daytime Tutor /Lead Tutor
C3	Fall 2014	Daytime Tutor /Lead Tutor
C4	Fall 2015	Daytime Tutor
C5	Fall 2014	Daytime Tutor

Note. Participants were assigned codes based on focus group attendance.

Data Analysis

The analysis process used in this study was derived from qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined content analysis as a “research method for the subjective interpretation of context of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1,278). Kirk and Miller (1986) highlighted the importance of specific analysis procedures to connect data between multiple focus group sessions. In addition, Kirk and Miller (1986) underscored the vital role text interpretation plays in the content analysis process.

I used NVivo software for the data analysis as well as hand coding the transcription text. Adhering to adaptations of content analysis processes outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), Datt (2016), Morgan (1997), Rabiee (2004) and Miles and Hubermann (1994) I followed a five-step analysis process as outlined in Table 3 found in Chapter 3. These steps were (1) data preparation and transcription review, (2) identification of unit themes and starter codes, (3) investigator notations and review to develop coding schemes and categories, (4) identification of emergent codes, and (5) definition and revision of codes.

Following the five-step content analysis process, I began by predicting basic themes founded from the literature review and knowledge regarding military learners. I reviewed transcriptions and field notes to gain a greater insight of the focus group discussions. Seeking to identify contextual connections in the data, I reviewed the transcriptions for starter codes and later identified and noted emergent codes using a combination of NVivo coding and hand-written coding. Through this analysis process several main concepts were identified by frequency and intensity of the discussion regarding these themes. Categories emerged from the data and connections between codes became apparent. I reviewed the transcriptions and made notations

regarding impressions of the discussion and focus group sessions. This process provided a greater context between the three sessions, and emergent codes were identified during this review process.

Findings

I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix D) to gain insight and reveal the experiences of military learners employed as tutors. The interview protocol served as the focus group session format and guided each session. Interview protocol questions related to initial codes that had been identified from the research questions and literature review. The interview protocol focused on four primary categories relating to the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners: (1) perceived military and academic identity, (2) faculty, campus and peer engagement practices, (3) perceived belonging, and (4) perceived impact of tutoring employment on engagement practices and sense of belonging. I compared these categories to three primary themes that emerged from the analysis process. The themes function as the organizational scheme of the study findings.

Military Culture and Academic Culture

Military learners function as “representatives of a minority culture” (Starr-Glass, 2015, p. 96). All participants perceived a campus disconnection as a result of being a military learner. They expressed their involvement in both military culture and academic culture on campus. Participant responses revealed a compartmentalization of the two cultures in which no integration occurs. They described military culture with distinct principles and philosophy, clearly articulating an estrangement between military and academic culture.

Participants emphasized the impact of military culture, demeanor, and mindset on their interactions with campus peers and faculty. Military experiences were highlighted and noted as

defining influences on their lives as students. Participants described increased levels of autonomy and the loss of a team approach contributed to a gap between military culture and academic culture. Participants stressed the influence of a military mindset rooted from these military experiences and how this mindset negatively affected their interactions within academic environments.

The disconnection between military culture and academic culture was highlighted in all three focus group sessions. Despite military affiliation: ROTC, active duty, and veteran participants in this study referred to their military experiences as a defining influence on their self-identity and functioned as a significant “other” segment of their life.

Veterans in each focus group expressed deep feelings of disconnection between their military culture and their academic culture. Their responses reinforced the minority culture perspective found in Starr-Glass’s (2015) research regarding military learners. For example, participant C1, a veteran who had been deployed, observed about his military identity:

“It’s pretty much ingrained and it’s not something we can take off. If you knew me in high school, Boot Camp was a defining moment for me. There’s a before and after, if you know what I’m saying. Even my ex-wife says, “You came home different and never went back to the (name) I knew.” I’m different than I used be.”

In focus group sessions, participants depicted deeply defined military identities despite being on campus. One area discussed was appearance and demeanor as a result of military service experiences.

“You get a (military) mindset, and then you stay that way.” Participant A2

“I get called too serious all the time. It is hard to be approachable I guess. It’s hard to come off as approachable. It’s because we are trained not to smile. Showing teeth shows weakness. Everyone else can light up a smile and we just sit there looking angry.”
Participant A3

Participant B1, active ROTC member, commented:

“When I’m around campus walking in my uniform I get a lot of eyes from people. Sometimes it’s just get out of my way and other times people look at me as a (military) source-even though I’m just an average student. Sort of makes you stand out.”

Veteran participant A1 observed: “There are places (at ECU) where military personnel feel less welcome.” Participant C2, also a veteran, commented, “I felt disconnected from everybody here, because of being military.” Participants strongly expressed their belief that their military identity resulted in being a part of a different group of students despite their new academic community.

“I think that being a military connected student means you are reflecting more than just yourself. You’re representing the branch you come from in what you do.” Participant B2

Participant responses regarding academic and military culture are consistent with the research findings of Starr-Glass (2015). Starr-Glass (2015) studied military learners and found that they were defined by their military experiences and functioned as “representatives of a minority culture” (Starr-Glass, 2015, p. 96) on the college campus. Further, the study highlighted a disconnection between military culture and academic culture for military learners enrolled in higher education.

Although not working directly with military learners, Strayhorn (2015) recognized the unique cultures some student groups maintained when enrolling in post-secondary education. Strayhorn (2015) emphasized that higher education culture possesses its own unique culture with norms, beliefs and conduct rules. Strayhorn (2015) highlighted the struggle students encountered while balancing the differences between prior cultural norms and present academic culture. This dissonance was substantiated by participants in each focus group session. For example, one participant noted of the ROTC unit on campus, “I think that the (ROTC) unit is like a subculture of ECU and that it kind of separates you.”

Cultural gaps occur when military learners encounter the dominant culture of higher education in comparison to the norms and structure of military culture. Berry and Candis (2013)

attributed cultural gap for student groups as a disconnection between the culture of the learner and the educational culture they have joined. For the participants in this study, cultural gaps stemmed from the intensity of military culture. These cultural elements include a well-defined soldierly mindset, the norms of a distinct hierarchical and command structure, team work approaches reinforced in the service, and uniformity in military behaviors and demeanor.

Military learners belong to a brotherhood. The participants expressed feelings of heightened affiliation to fellow service members that transcended onto campus communities. The conceptualization of brotherhood was apparent between participants in the focus group sessions. Shortly after sessions began, the participants quickly supported each other's responses with head nods, messages of agreement, and supportive language. As an observer, I detected a comradery between participants even though several did not know each other prior to the focus group session. The participants acknowledged their service connections and commented on each other's experiences. In addition, a gap in military belonging became apparent between ROTC members and active duty National Guard, Reservists, and veteran participants. The ROTC participants weighed in on the concept of brotherhood, but it was clear that their understanding was limited. The strongest responses regarding brotherhood and military service came from veterans and active duty National Guard and Reserve participants. For example, in focus group C, participant C2 observed differences between military life and campus life. He highlighted the difference in the conceptualization of brotherhood in fraternity life on campus in contrast to his military experiences:

“One of the things that got me was frats for some reason. I'd walk around and they all looked the same and dressed in the same kind of uniform. But they just wouldn't have the same bearing that I would expect people to have. I don't know but it's almost poser military people-oh, you guys think you are a brotherhood? That's ridiculous. You don't know what a brotherhood is.”

His comment was met with head nods and agreement from the other four participants in his focus group session. Another participant in the same focus group added, “In combat is where I was bonded with people that I was in with and was living with.” All of the focus group C participants, regardless of affiliation, were in agreement concerning their understanding of “brotherhood” and the shared meaning it has for military personnel. The concept of “brotherhood” was also presented in focus group A. Participant A2, an ROTC member, stated:

“I think there’s an atmosphere in the military that’s like a brotherhood. There is a connectedness—a tight knit that’s formed over a long period of time that nobody really understands.”

The observations of the participants regarding brotherhood is compatible with the research of Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal (2010), Kuehner (2013), and Naphan and Elliott (2015) on military learners. Kelty et al. (2010) described the hyper-masculine environment within military culture in which brotherhood is established and encouraged. Military culture is purposely developed and maintained as distinct and identifiable in comparison to civilian life or academic life. Starr-Glass (2015) described the college environment as operating in direct opposition with military environment.

Military learners maintain a double life. Focus group participants expressed difficulty in balancing responsibilities associated with dual identities. They found maintaining academic and military obligations challenging in the campus environment. Active duty National Guard, Reserves, and ROTC participants stressed difficulty coping with frequent military-to-campus transitions as a result of military obligations. Unlike veterans, they find themselves challenged to manage competing identities which necessitate the negotiation of dual belonging between military and academic culture. The participants described the duality of school and military

obligations as “harder” to balance and struggled to meet “differing obligations” as military learners. Another commented on being a military learner:

“Makes school harder because you’re not only a student but you also have to follow whatever you need to do for the military too. The two have different things expected and they are not alike or together. You have the school needing you to do things and the military telling you what to do as well. You have to find a good balance.” Participant B4

Other participants echoed the duality of identities and their different expectations:

“You’ve got different obligations than all other students here. I mean especially if you’re still in some component or another whether it’s the Guard or Reserves. You don’t have every weekend free to go to a pool party or whatever else you want to do.” Participant B2

Another participant used the phrase “double life” to describe what military identity meant to his college experiences:

“It’s almost like a double life because you know there’s a student life you live. But with the military, there’s a whole different life you also have to follow. They take up different time schedules. They both require different things.” Participant B4

Other participants addressed similar challenges in being responsible for active duty requirements and university obligations simultaneously:

“I feel as a military connected student we are more stressed as a college student. I mean since I’m still in it (National Guard) I’ll have weekends when I have a drill. A weekend ago I had a final (exam) on Monday morning at 8am, and I had drill all weekend. So, it makes it a little bit harder to study. It puts more stress as a college student to be military connected.” Participant C4

“I had no life and there was not enough time in the day. Physics homework takes hours to do and understand it. Especially on the weekends when you have to go for a drill, you have a test the next day, and homework is due Monday.” Participant C2

Military service experiences impact student identity. The participants perceived differences in their identity in comparison to collegiate peers on campus. The participants, who identified themselves as over age 25, addressed an age difference in their responses. One veteran commented:

“There is an age difference and it’s like a comic strip I’ve seen on what it’s like going back to school on a G.I. Bill. It shows someone twice the size of everybody else around them in the room, trying to scrunch in the desk. It looks like all six-year olds are in the classroom around them.” Participant A1

He continued:

“I’m over 30. The problems I have are entirely different from problems of an 18-year-old or 19-year-old.” Participant A1

Another veteran observed:

“One thing I’ve noticed is that these kids have never been out in the world and they don’t even have an idea of the world. You can’t explain color to a blind man. They don’t want to hear your experiences.” Participant C1

The responses of the active duty National Guard and Reserve participants are consistent with the research findings of Wyatt (2011) regarding their adoption of non-traditional student characteristics. These participants, who are primarily traditionally aged students between ages 19 and 24, echoed the observations of the older participants in the study. Despite their younger age, they reported feelings attributed to non-traditional learners:

“There is a social aspect to (being military). I wouldn’t say I’m looking down on them (students). There are some very level-headed kids that have their heads on right. It is just that the kind of conversations and the kind of things that they would feel comfortable with hearing me say is different as opposed to my friends in the Marine Corps.” Participant A4

Older participants noted the age differences in the classroom and referred to their campus peers as “kids,” and “like six-year-olds.” Surprisingly, one veteran offered a different perspective of campus peers:

“In the military age kind of disappears. You can relate to other soldiers even if they are 5 to 10 years older because they are in your same position. When I came to college, it was the same thing. The students thought I was their age. It helped a little bit that they were unaware of our age difference.” Participant C3

When questioned regarding their adjustment to campus life and establishment of a student identity, the participants varied in responses and a difference between ROTC and active

duty and veteran responses became apparent. For the ROTC members, transition to student life reflected a more traditional experience and what we would expect from a student in their first year of college. They perceived positive benefits of ROTC membership and required military involvement in their establishment of a student identity. These benefits include the establishment of friendships and amplified structure dictated by ROTC obligations. Involvement with ROTC helped them with time management, provided friendships, and afforded a place to belong on campus. Veterans and active duty participants reported their establishment of student life and identity was more challenging. In his transition to campus life, one veteran described his experience as a lonely one:

“I didn’t really talk to anybody because I commuted to school. I drove an hour and a half to campus, went to classes, and then went home. I’d literally go all day without saying a word to anybody.” Participant C1

Another veteran participant described his experience as characterized by disconnection from peers, social isolation, and challenged by prior deployment experiences:

“I was 24 years old and I was in school for a year when I got a letter saying I had to deploy. Deployment meant I was gone for another school year. When I came back to school I felt completely disconnected from campus.

It was a completely different experience being in another country for six months and then you come back to students that are 3 or 4 years younger than you. My military experience made it a little harder to relate. But running into people in the Veterans Services Office and talking to other veterans does a little make you feel a little more welcome on campus.” Participant C5

Wyatt (2011) noted military learners, regardless of age, adopted traits of mature or non-traditional students resulting from their military experiences. Describing military learners as “prepackaged,” prior to post-secondary enrollment, Wyatt (2011) observed an amplified maturity stemming from different life experiences, and different values in comparison to 12 collegiate

peers. The amplified maturity impacts student identity and is characterized by isolation and feelings of disconnection.

Campus Isolation and Problematic Engagement

In comparison to ROTC participants, the veterans as well as active duty National Guard and Reservists highlighted a deep-seated disconnection between them and their campus peers. Participant A3, an active duty National Guard member, described his initial engagement with peers as “non-existent” and often felt estranged from campus peers. Another active duty National Guard member, participant C2, echoed the same feelings of disconnection. He attributed his difficulties with peer engagement resulted from enrolling in college immediately following BASIC military training. He described his engagement as having “absolutely no contact with anybody on campus at all.”

Participants’ responses are consistent with other studies regarding the peer engagement of military learners. Both the APSCU Blue Ribbon Taskforce Report (2013) and Kircher (2015) highlighted the social barrier and peer engagement difficulties military learners experience as a result of their military experiences.

Military identity results in campus isolation. For the college student, academic culture is defined by interactions with both peers and faculty members and their ability to transition to campus life (Strayhorn, 2012). Except for the ROTC participants in the study, most participants described difficulty navigating cultural and engagement activities. Of the thirteen participants in the study, four participants (30.7%) were transfer students from regional community colleges. Their responses focused on campus differences between community college and four-year institutions as they transitioned to a new academic environment. They highlighted the dissimilar profile of student enrolled in their classes.

When asked to describe campus engagement experiences, most of the participants agreed that they encountered a degree of disconnection with faculty and peers. Their responses are consistent with the research findings of Callahan and Jarrat (2014) and Hamrick and Rumann (2013). Their work identified similar challenges and observed that military learners maintained their service member identity despite their new role as a student.

Military learners experience difficulties engaging with campus peers. Participants were asked to describe their connection and engagement activities with peers prior to their academic employment. Although not all participants provided negative perceptions when asked about their peer engagement experiences, the majority of the participants highlighted the barriers that age and life differences placed between them and their collegiate peers. The perception of barriers was differentiated by military affiliation and resulted in distinct differences in how ROTC members, active duty, and veterans described their relationships and interactions with peers. For example, one ROTC cadet, Participant B1, described his freshman year as a process of navigation between two peer groups, military and campus:

“I had a good time between my groups of friends. I had an Army group of friends and a civilian group of friends.”

Cole and Kim (2013) observed similar difficulties for military learners and their establishment of a campus engagement. In their research study, military learners described the social and academic barriers caused by differences in age, life experiences, and the influence of military culture (Cole & Kim, 2013). Most participants expressed similar feelings:

“Interacting with people is a lot different. Before I enlisted I could talk with people. But now that I am back, it’s harder. People like to keep things light. I try to talk politics or why the world is the way it is and they just look at me like I’m weird.” Participant A3

Another observed:

“Interacting with peers was pretty much nonexistent. There was not any interaction. My first semester I transferred I was still living an hour away, so I was commuting an hour

each way, five days a week. On Fridays, I had to leave class and drive near home to my job. I had to go to work until 10pm on Friday night, work 9am-6pm on Saturday and Sunday. All on top of taking 15 credit hours. There was no time for making a friend. I wasn't even living in the same town." Participant A1

Lacking the brotherhood felt while in military service, participants described detachment from non-military peers on campus. Caught between competing military and academic culture and identities, participants struggled to establish meaningful connections with campus peers. Veteran and active duty National Guard and Reserve participants reported the lowest levels of peer engagement and social connections prior to academic employment:

"My exact words are non-existent, no interactions. When I became active duty, I was super "Boot Camp" and got my haircut every week and wore a black shirt and jeans every day. I've assimilated a lot more now but defiantly looked like the guy you did not want to talk to because he was going to be super weird. I was the guy that looked like he would have a PTSD episode in the middle of class. I moved into a one-bedroom apartment, went to school, work and the gym. That is how I lived." Participant A3

Another veteran used similar language in the focus group C session:

"I wasn't getting to know anybody on campus and never did get to know anybody. I was straight out of BASIC and I had no contact with anybody on campus at all." Participant C2

One of the participants, a veteran, commented on the reality of deployment and its effect on his views and mindset toward college and campus peers:

"I was lucky that I got out of the service and was able to do pretty much go in and hit the ground running and just study school. Make a few friends, talk to people. It was hard sometimes and I had to bite my tongue sometimes but I was lucky. I was lucky that I still have all my arms and legs, right? Not everyone came back that way, and not everyone has an easy transition back."

He further noted:

"I see my friends that I deployed with on Facebook and how they go on rants about how they flipped out in class or how they're struggling in school. Some are sitting on their asses, not using their G.I. Bill, and not doing anything. So yeah, there are people that struggle and don't make the transition." Participant A4

Not all participants perceived barriers to their establishment of a peer engagement. ROTC participants expressed a more frequent and positive engagement with peers, which started their first semester on campus. This difference is due to their similar age to their collegiate peers, participation in heightened engagement opportunities afforded by living in residence halls, and their limited military experiences prior to campus enrollment. One ROTC student observed a positive effect from ROTC participation:

“For me it (ROTC) made my experience in college because I came here to do ROTC. I came into the military coming into college so it just made my experience here and I made a lot of friends through it. A lot of my friends are in the same (ROTC) unit.” Participant C4

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) noted the importance of peer interactions as a facilitator of supportive campus connections. For military learners, interactions with peers are instrumental to their civilian and campus socialization (Kirchner, 2015). The work of Tinto (1998) and Astin (1993) further underscored the importance social and academic aspects of the academy play for collegiate success. Tinto (1998) attributed faculty, peer, and academic interactions as socializing agents that influence the establishment of a positive student-institution relationship match. Astin’s work (1996) placed importance on the frequency of peer interactions as an indicator of student success, especially for underrepresented groups.

Shared participant responses echoed the responses found in Osborne’s (2014a) qualitative research with military learners. Osborne (2014a, 2014b) noted the problematic nature of the establishment of social connections and relationships between military learners and non-military peers. Osborne (2014a, 2014b) recognized the positive impact personal relationships on campus have on college decisions, persistence and degree attainment. He found that military learners commonly reported feelings of separation and isolation from campus peers because of their military and life experiences. Osborne (2014a, 2014b) highlighted cultural gaps and differences

in life experience as contributing factors to social disconnection. Military learners perceive the loss of the team and fellow soldiers found in military culture and find themselves lacking the social connections they experienced in military life (Osborne, 2014). The research conducted by Ford and Vignare (2015) also identified cultural gaps between military and higher education as a significant impediment to the socialization of military learners.

Military learners experience low levels of faculty engagement. When asked to describe their faculty relationships and interactions prior to academic employment, most participants perceived low levels of faculty engagement. Active duty and ROTC participants expressed challenging communication processes with faculty members. One National Guard member commented:

“I get a little worried because of the way we interacted with our superiors in the military. It wasn’t always pleasant, so sometimes I do get nervous when I go talk to a teacher.”
Participant C3

One veteran conveyed his frustration as a military learner and non-traditional student as he dealt with faculty members:

“Sometimes I get treated like I’m some 18-year-old kid. I know you’re older than me dude, but don’t start talking down to me and being condescending. It was because there was a difference of opinion and I was trying to be being respectful about presenting my perspective. Don’t start talking to me like I’m 18. I’m married, I got kids, and I was in the Marine Corps.” Participant A1

Due to their familiarity with the hierarchical structure of military culture and command norms, the participants viewed faculty members as less than professional and expressed reluctance to engage with faculty in and out of the classroom. The majority of participants viewed their faculty relationships through the lens of employment, several referring to faculty as a supervisor. For example, in focus group session A, participants commented on their motivation to enroll in college as an avenue to future employment. For military learners, G.I. Bill benefits provide the

ability to enter post-secondary institutions and pay a monthly stipend for attendance. Participant use of G.I. Bill benefits was regarded as a pathway to future employment and they considered school as an employment opportunity. One veteran participant highlighted the usefulness of G.I.

Bill benefits:

“I knew I wanted to go to graduate school and I knew I was being paid by the military to come back to school, so I approached school as a job. So, faculty are relatively non-harsh supervisors.” Participant A1

Others elaborated on their interactions with faculty members in negative tones. Their words highlighted their adverse perception of faculty on campus:

“Well I would say there's a difference between approachable and wanting to approach. What I mean is, approachable is when there is a genuine care for the material, genuine passion for what you're teaching, and if you can present it in a way that is just not the textbook on PowerPoint. Give us some outside insight or another way to think about something, and that's it for me. Outside the classroom if the person is really mean or just offends a lot I don't care. I'll be able to talk to that person.” Participant A4

“I have yet to have a professor that intimidated me in any way. If I had to judge, it would be sitting in class when someone asks a question and they would respond eagerly as opposed to putting them down as if that was a dumb question or something. But it's not going to stop me. If I have a question I'm going to talk to you about it.” Participant A3

Military culture dictates a separation from authority figures who are higher in rank than the soldier. Communication and engagement with superiors is regulated and structured by their service rank. In contrast, academic culture promotes freedom of expression and encourages the learner to challenge educational authority. For military learners, the military-academic culture gap influences their establishment of faculty engagement.

Military learners encounter negative faculty engagement. Participants characterized communication with faculty as difficult and unsympathetic with military obligations. The active duty Reserve, National Guard or ROTC participants emphasized the tenuous relationship they have between faculty, classroom expectations, and military commitments. One National Guard

member relayed his experiences when having to notify faculty of a class conflict with military duties. He perceived faculty as “not really helpful” when it comes to time conflicts or military obligations. Another National Guard member relayed the frustrations associated with exam dates, assignments and class attendance:

“I’ve had trouble in my experience with test dates and assignments dates that are set in stone. But attendance, if I’m getting graded on attendance, we shouldn’t get points off if you’re missing for National Guard.”

“I’ve only ever had two professors give me extra time on assignments. One professor insisted on giving the whole class extra time whenever I asked because it wasn’t fair.”
Participant C2

“One teacher dropped the two lowest quiz grades. I was going to miss the quiz for the Guard. She was like, well, there’s no makeup for quizzes, so you can drop it.” Participant B2

Rumann and Hamrick (2009) underscored the importance of faculty gaining a better sense of military culture and called for improvement in their social understanding of military learners. Griffin and Gilbert (2012) emphasized the influence faculty have on military learners on the college campus. Increased knowledge and understanding of the needs of the military student are essential components of their collegiate success (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).

There were a few responses that characterized faculty in a positive manner. Participants who responded positively regarding faculty attributed the positive interaction because of the faculty member’s supportive viewpoint regarding the military. They made a point to highlight the faculty member’s positive opinion of the military and their connection to military service.

“I had a good relationship with my English teacher last semester. She just loved teaching; you can really tell when a teacher loves her job. I went into office hours explaining drill dates and stuff and we talked about all kinds of things. She had a lot of family in the military and we had a good conversation. We built kind of a good relationship.”
Participant B3

“My first semester and second semester English teacher was awesome. He wasn’t in the military but he was a big supporter and that kind of broke the ground.” Participant B4

Chickering (1969) and Pascarella (1980) highlighted the significance of informal faculty interactions on the sense of belonging of college students. Chickering and Gamson (1991) emphasized the influence faculty-student interactions have on student engagement and involvement in the academic community. Their research provided an application of Astin's theory of involvement and highlighted the beneficial relationship of frequent faculty interactions. It asserted that faculty engagement functions as a reflection of a student's overall institutional commitment (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) found military learners experience impediments to establishing meaningful relationships with faculty members. Karp et al. (2008) also highlighted the influence of faculty connection on the achievement of academic success. For the military learner, a disconnection with faculty members can lower their ability to persist (Karp et al., 2008). Kim and Cole's 2013 NSSE data analysis revealed 39% of military learners describe disconnected relationships with faculty members.

Military learners experience challenges in the classroom. Veteran participants expressed heightened disconnection in classroom environments with their peers and faculty prior to academic employment. For example, one veteran described a classroom experience related to his past deployment to Iraq. In a Sociology class, the faculty member's lecture became politically infused and comments were made regarding military behavior in Iraq and Afghanistan. Terms like "baby killers" were used to describe soldiers during the class lecture.

"Sociology is very political and I had one professor talking about baby killers. Honestly, I wanted to be like, you've been in academia your whole life! It gets uncomfortable when he was talking about Iraq. You have no idea what it was like." Participant C5

Classroom experiences like the one shared by this veteran reinforced feeling disconnected and isolated. Regardless of age, veteran or active duty participants described

disconnected relationships with faculty and peers in the classroom. Their perceptions regarding peer ages, the effect of military experiences, and the gap between military and academic culture result in classroom estrangement.

“I’m over 30 so problems I have are entirely different from problems that an 18-year-old or 19-year-old (has). That’s different from differences because of service, that’s just an age difference.”

He continued:

“If you’ve already been in the military you’re going to have that age difference. Also, having been in the military, you’ve dealt with some very difficult and unpleasant things. So, when you hear people complain about “All this work how can they expect me to do this and oh my teacher’s so mean” --you’re just sitting there thinking what are you talking about?” Participant A1

Study participants highlighted the difficulties encountered in the classroom. Participants recounted experiences that emphasized challenging interactions experienced on campus. Similar observations have been reported in other studies regarding the experiences of military learners in post-secondary classrooms. Griffin and Gilbert (2012) attributed the academic barriers military learners experience as a result of the misconceptions of faculty and peers regarding the military culture and identity.

Beneficial Impact of Academic Employment

While researchers have reported that academic employment can have a positive impact on the engagement of college students, (Burgess et al., 2016; Keup, 2016) there remains a gap in the literature in how academic employment impacts military learners. This study introduces a new area of inquiry by exploring the relationship of academic employment and military learners. In focus group sessions, participants revealed the beneficial nature of involvement in a peer-supported learning environment and expressed enhanced sense of belonging and peer relationships. Despite their military affiliation, participant responses are consistent with another

qualitative study on the effect of academic employment on non-military students in the role of tutors. Burgess et al. (2016) noted that “the learning environment afforded by the tutors promoted supportive interactions between the tutors and tutees that fostered confidence for both groups of students” (p. 5). Within the tutoring environment, tutors regarded their tutoring program as a learning environment that was enjoyable and supportive (Burgess et al., 2016). For the participants in this study, employment cultivated four beneficial outcomes: (1) increased connectivity to campus life, (2) increased peer engagement opportunities, (3) deeper perceptions of sense of belonging, and (4) the establishment of a new academic identity.

Academic employment connects military learners to campus life. Regardless of military affiliation, all participants described positive benefits of tutoring employment and connectivity to campus, peers, and campus identity. One participant stated:

“You’ve got more of an investment. You’re in the system. You are part of the institution as opposed to a person infiltrating into classes.” Participant A1

Participant C5 also expressed an enhanced connectivity to campus by “having somewhere to go on campus and something to do.” Others described how the role of tutor impacted their campus experience and by being included in a social group on campus:

“I think we all agree on that. I would come to campus and leave. I was introverted too. This place (Pirate Academic Success Center) brings you out of your shell.” Participant C1

“I would say it’s like the military. Once you become a tutor and wear the tutor shirt or you come to work, you represent who you work for. Now you do things by the book and appear professional. You really try to make the transfer from student to professional and you know after you graduate, tutoring helps you talk to people, get better at interacting, and learn how to teach other people. It’s almost hard to describe because the change is so big.” Participant B3

One of the active duty National Guard participants underscored the importance of academic employment to his transition to campus life following deployment:

“For me, I came here from Afghanistan and I got a job here (Pirate Academic Success Center). It reintroduced me to campus. I was so used to being in the desert for 6 months and with the same people all the time, and had a certain mindset.”

“You just come back to life because it’s not stressful here. Having somewhere to come, somewhere to work, and be with people that are friendly and nice. Having somewhere to be where I feel welcome. It made life a lot easier my last two semesters I was in school. It made life (on campus) a lot easier.” Participant C5

Academic employment increases peer engagement. The veterans and active duty participants in this study described low levels of peer engagement prior to employment and highlighted their increased connection to campus peers after academic employment. In focus group A, one veteran observed:

“One time when I was tutoring I had a student tell me that ‘I just made an A!’ and thanked me. We ended up being on a first name basis. I saw him at Dowdy one day and sat down for a coffee and we just talked.” Participant A1

Another participant commented on an increased sense of belonging:

“I’ll say that I definitely feel at the tutoring center I feel a part of a community. Super different from how I was my first semester where I was pretty much go to campus and go home.” Participant C2

He added:

“Yes, hands down this (tutoring) was a game changer. Before the tutoring center I was introverted. Now I think I’m a pretty good teacher.” Participant C2

Participant C2’s comments were met with verbal and nonverbal agreement by the other participants in the focus group session. They noted the following reflections:

“When I first got here you know (name) and (name), they were Physics tutors and we all started hanging out. My entire friend group basically spread from those three. Yeah, the tutoring center was the springboard for my friendships.” Participant C5

“The calibers of people who are employed at the tutoring center are intelligent and you know you can have a mature conversation with them.” Participant C1

In comparison to veterans and active duty National Guard or Reservists, the ROTC participants, who began college as freshmen, did not describe feelings of social isolation prior to

academic employment. Despite beginning with higher levels of peer engagement, they still described augmented peer engagement. They also attributed peer engagement to their academic employment as tutors. One ROTC participant remarked:

“I think the connection with students here and tutoring has helped me. It’s given me a kind of tool box to use in our ROTC program. Whether its accountability or whether its consistency or asking good questions. These are all things that can be used in life or with people in ROTC.” Participant A2

Other research has demonstrated that peer engagement can positively impact college success and the peer connections students make within tutoring activities are markedly impactful in the higher education experience of tutors (Calma & Eggins, 2012). Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999) noted the reciprocal relationship between tutor and tutee; the structure to learn from each other provides opportunities for collaborative work. Peer tutoring provides student tutors increased opportunities to engage and interact with peers on campus (Calma & Eggins, 2012). In a quantitative study derived from the 2009 National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition Peer Leadership Survey, Keup (2016) analyzed the perceptions of change as reported by peer leaders. Keup (2016) described peer leadership as a high impact practice that is beneficial and found students in peer leadership roles gain as much from the experiences. Peer leaders perceived change in their undergraduate experiences and noted an increased frequency of interactions with peers and faculty (Keup, 2016).

Academic employment fosters a deeper sense of belonging. Most participants perceived a deeper sense of campus belonging as a result of academic employment as tutors. They described high levels of belonging to their new tutoring community and attributed these feelings toward a greater sense of belonging on campus. Participants described the establishment of a heightened connection to the university, peers, and faculty as a result of their academic employment. Participants in each focus group session agreed that the role of tutor influenced

their perception of belonging on campus. The following statements are examples of their responses:

“I think it provides place and a sense of belonging.” Participant A2

“You have a place on campus.” Participant A1

“It’s where your name is and your picture is.” Participant A4

“It’s somewhere you are welcomed and you’re recognized and enjoyed and appreciated.” Participant A2

“It forces you to become a part of the campus. One of my favorite things I used to do is to go to class and then get off campus as fast as possible. Once I started working here, (learning center) I’m now used to being here, do feel more engaged.” Participant C5

“I’ll say that I definitely feel like at the tutoring center I am a part of a community. Super different from how I was my first semester where I would pretty much go to campus and then go home.” Participant C2

Although not working with military learners, Keup (2016) studied the potential impact of academic employment on the tutor’s sense of belonging. Keup (2016) found that peer leaders in an academic employment role like tutoring perceived a deeper sense of belonging at the institution because of their increased frequency of interactions with peers.

It is important to note the change in all participant perceptions of belonging after academic employment. Participants in this study attributed academic employment as a catalyst to formulating a deeper sense of belonging on campus. Other research studies that involve military learners, noted they maintain lower levels of belonging and continue to have trouble establishing connections on campus despite support programs. Research shows that military culture and identity negatively impact perceptions of belonging on campus. For the participants in this study, their involvement in academic employment as tutors altered the way they perceived themselves and their ability to establish a campus “fit.” Their observations of change in their perception of belonging are a significant finding of this study.

Academic employment fosters a new academic identity. The role of identity and the creation of campus connections and establishment of engagement practices emerged as a primary theme for the participants in this study. Prior to academic employment, participants described dualities of identity with military identity maintained in tandem with their academic identity. Participants used terms like “double life” and regarded themselves as members of two culture groups. When asked about their academic identity after becoming a tutor, participants indicated that as tutors they now had a place to fit in on campus. All participants viewed academic employment as a tutor helpful in the establishment of a new purpose and role on campus. Their new identity as a tutor allowed them to transfer feelings of social isolation to feelings of mattering and belonging.

In his research with groups identified as marginalized on college campuses, Strayhorn (2012) found campus involvements, like academic employment, can assist students in transcending their cultural identities, to establish a new academic identity. Extending Strayhorn’s work, Hom (2015) examined the relationship between the need to belong and finding connections to a campus community. Hom (2015) found the unique cultural identity of Asian American students attributed to difficulties in the establishment of an academic identity. Hom (2015) noted when new connections were established in accepting campus communities, Asian American students transcended their cultural identity and could establish new academic identities.

Participants in this study described a change in their perception of academic identity. They indicated their academic employment activities and role as tutor impacted their identity as a student. They described their participation in an academic mission and appreciated having some ownership of the services provided by the learning center. Although this change did not function

as a replacement for their military identity, they observed a stronger sense of belonging and engagement.

Unexpected Findings

Only three participants described positive engagement practices with faculty members as a result of academic employment. The majority of participants continued to regard faculty in a negative manner. One participant in focus group A relayed a positive experience with a faculty member for whom he was assigned to tutor. He commented on the beneficial interaction that occurred because of his tutoring assignment:

“I talked with the professor I was tutoring for a few times. I had a minor in Philosophy and not a double major, and he recommended, based on talking to me about my interests, to be a double major. In Philosophy and additional majors, you have it wide open in terms of what you can take. You just have to take certain levels but there are no specific class requirements. So, I asked, what do you think I would benefit from? What do you think I should take? I sat down with him and he suggested classes that should be offered, recommended classes he thought I should take and ones I would find the most interesting. So yeah, that was nice to have.” Participant A1

Another participant, from the focus group C session, talked with pride regarding the positive recognition he received while presenting in a Physics class:

“We have to do tutoring introductions in classes at the beginning of the semester and talk to the professor. One time I went in there and it was Dr. (name). He told the class that I started off doing horribly in his Physics class but went to tutoring and got an A and now am Lead Tutor making bank.” Participant C2

One participant attributed the positive staff interactions he experienced to his tutoring experiences:

“When I was talking about being a little intimidated to talk to professors after being in the military, I did want to point out that after being at the tutoring center and (staff name) and (staff name) are so nice and supportive, I just wanted to make sure you knew that you help out in more than one way.” Participant C4

Very few positive comments were used regarding faculty members. The overall impression that prevailed in each focus group session was a negative portrayal of faculty and

participant engagement despite tutoring employment. Participant word choices to describe faculty included: “unprofessional,” “disconnected from the real world,” “condescending,” “unpleasant and difficult,” “put zero effort into class preparation,” “not really helpful,” and “frustrating.”

Based on the literature regarding academic employment and what we know of the beneficial nature of frequent faculty engagement, I expected the participants to report positive changes in their perceptions of faculty members. I anticipated the augmented engagement experiences with faculty to change participants’ attitudes towards faculty. The participants in this study did not perceive a beneficial impact on their faculty relationships. Despite their academic employment as tutors, the participants continued to negatively perceive their interactions with faculty members. Their identity as military learners, despite academic employment, remained consistent with the observations of other military learners noted in the review of literature (Cole & Kim, 2013; Kirchner, 2015; Jones, 2013; Wyatt, 2011).

Summary

This study explored how military learners employed as tutors experienced and perceived sense of belonging and engagement on the college campus. Focus groups were held with military learners who have been employed as tutors. A 12-question interview protocol guided each of the three focus groups and the questions asked were designed to reveal the elements and themes that impacted participant perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement. Focus group questions asked intended to illuminate the experiences and influences that impacted the perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in higher education.

Chapter Five summarizes the study, provides a discussion of the findings, reviews the study approach and results of the study. Recommendations for policy and practices are also presented in the chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The Post 9/11 Veterans Assistance Act of 2008 G.I. Bill educational benefits are providing increased access for high numbers of military learners to enroll on American college campuses (Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Challenged by the distinctive needs of this growing military learner population, higher education leaders are summoned to expand their knowledge of the needs of these students and seek to create institutional policies, processes, and programs to better support their ability to succeed in post-secondary environments (Cole & Kim, 2013; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Vacchi, 2012).

Chapter One of this study provided an introduction to military learners and their connection to higher education as well as their characteristics, preliminary support services, and the unique challenge these students bring to the post-secondary campus. Chapter Two offered a summary of research related to military learners and the G.I. Bill educational benefits program. Chapters Three and Four provided a detailed overview of the research process as well as the findings of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to feature the study's primary findings and examine their implications for higher education institutions. This chapter is organized into six sections, beginning with the review of the study approach. The second section is a brief review of the study findings and the primary results of the study. The third and fourth sections present the delimitations and limitations of the study and study implications and recommendations for future research. The fifth and sixth sections of this chapter present implications and recommendations for higher education practice and policy and the conclusion of the study.

Study Approach

Military learners possess social and academic needs that differ in comparison to many of their non-military undergraduate peers. As a result, these students may not benefit from traditional points of engagement used to assist them in achieving academic and social success (Cole & Kim, 2013; McBain et al., 2012). Despite their differences, higher education leaders are called to investigate similarities between characteristics of military learners and other at-risk student groups. It is through these investigations that we can better address the needs of this growing student population.

Research indicates that military learners in higher education environments is that they experience lower levels of engagement, struggle to connect socially and are challenged by a duality in cultural identification (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; McBain et al., 2012; Vacchi, 2012). Military learners are caught between the expectations and identity of two cultures, military and academic. Military learners must transcend the culture gap between military life and academic life in order to achieve academic success. Strayhorn (2012) emphasized the important role that sense of belonging plays for students who maintain dual cultures. Strayhorn (2012) and Burgess et al. (2016) observed that sense of belonging in college is cultivated when students feel they fit as members of a community, sharing similar goals and purpose. Affirming sense of belonging as a building block for collegiate success, Strayhorn's work with marginalized student groups served as a theoretical foundation for this study.

This study employed a qualitative research approach with self-contained focus groups and investigated themes and experiences that impact the sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners. Three focus group sessions were held and 13 military learners participated. A 12-question interview protocol guided the focus group sessions. It was designed

to obtain narrative data from focus group participants (see Appendix D). The interview protocol explored influences associated with the sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners. The focus group sessions were small in size, included four to five participants, and afforded the opportunity for participants to interact and openly share their experiences. Four research questions were considered in this study:

1. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?
2. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?
3. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?
4. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Study Location

This study was conducted at only one institution, East Carolina University (ECU). East Carolina University is an institution in the North Carolina college system. ECU was chosen as the study location due to its large military learner enrollment and designation as a “Best for Vets” college and “Military Friendly School”. In addition, ECU’s centralized learning center, the Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC), has purposely recruited and hired 35 military learners in academic employment as tutors since 2013.

Participants in the Study

Participants in this study were purposely selected (Morgan, 1997) and convenience sampled (Morgan, 1997), using only one source for the identification and recruitment of study

participants. Participants were identified from the tutoring staff employment records of ECU's campus learning center between the years of 2013 to 2017. Study participants met both inclusion criteria: (1) is currently or has been enrolled as a military learner at East Carolina University, and (2) is currently or has been employed as a tutor at the campus learning center between the years of 2013 and 2017. The overall study included 13 participants divided among three focus group sessions.

Results of the Study

The military learners who participated in this study disclosed a new view of their higher education experiences and perceived impact of academic employment on their concept of belonging and engagement practices. Study findings revealed participant perceptions prior to academic employment. These perceptions were consistent with the limited literature on military learners in post-secondary institutions. Participants addressed their challenges with the duality of military and academic identity and culture, the impact of military and deployment experiences, their difficulty with campus socialization, and their perceived impact of academic employment.

Higher education research affirms the relationship between student engagement and sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) highlighted the significance of belonging for marginalized students on the college campus and characterized sense of belonging as a students' perceived support on campus, feelings of connectedness, the perception of mattering or feeling cared about, respected, accepted, and valued, and membership in a campus community. He underscored the psychological necessity of mattering within the new campus culture for marginalized student populations. In his research on marginalized student groups' sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2008a, 2002b, 2012) found interaction with faculty, peers and staff positively impacted student success outcomes and the establishment of campus belonging.

Research notes that the encounters military learners have with faculty, peers, staff, and administrators play an instrumental role in their establishment of a sense of belonging (Kirchner, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). There is little research published regarding the beneficial nature of academic employment on sense of belonging for military learners or other marginalized student populations. The body of research on academic employment and military learners is focused on workforce readiness and transitioning to the civilian marketplace. Seeking to better understand their campus experiences, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their transition experiences, their perception of military culture and identity, and their engagement practices with faculty, peers and campus.

Sense of Belonging and Military Learners

This section provides an examination of findings related to the first and third research questions put forward in Chapter One that sought to explore the perceptions of military learners and their sense of belonging on post-secondary institutions prior to and after their involvement in academic employment. Research question one: *What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?* Research question three: *How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?*

It is commonly accepted in higher education research that there is a relationship between sense of belonging, student engagement practices, and academic success (Astin, 1999; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975, 1998). In his work with marginalized student groups, Strayhorn (2012) examined the impact of student engagement in campus organizations on their sense of belonging and connectedness on campus. Strayhorn (2012) included components of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Astin's work on student involvement as instrumental to the establishment

of campus sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) observed four essential elements in the relationship between involvement and sense of belonging: (1) connections between other students with similar interests, (2) socialization to campus culture, (3) confirmation of student identity and interests, and (4) affirmation of mattering on campus. Strayhorn (2012) emphasized that the encounters students have in social and academic spaces on campus have an impact on the establishment of belonging and institutional fit.

Military learners perceive low sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) observed that marginalized student groups possess an intensified need for sense of belonging. In addition, Strayhorn (2012) found that the establishment of strong campus connections functions as a positive influence for students when their cultural identities conflict with campus identities. Military learners, who are inclined to experience social isolation and cultural alienation from academic culture on campus, struggle to establish sense of belonging at post-secondary institutions. Military learners experience social disconnection which greatly impacts their sense of belonging.

When asked to describe their perception of belonging with regards to campus, peers and faculty prior to academic employment as tutors, all study participants perceived low sense of belonging. Participants explained the way they coped with dual cultural identities, perceived institutional fit, and their feelings of social disconnection. Sense of belonging or perceived connection to faculty, peers and campus was minimal. For veteran, active National Guard or Reserves participants, a perceived sense of belonging was not articulated. Rather, they described their estrangement from campus and continued connection to military life rather than academic life. ROTC participants described higher levels of belonging, primarily as a result of limited military experiences, residence hall involvements, and being the at the same age level as their

peers. ROTC participants still articulated challenges resulting from a sense of dual cultural identities, military and academic.

This finding is substantiated in the studies of Branker (2009), and Callahan and Jarrat (2014) who noted military learners experience sense of belonging differently than non-military peers. Furthermore, military learners described decreased feelings of belonging and isolation and disconnection from peers and faculty on campus (Branker, 2009; Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). For military learners, a greater feeling of detachment negatively impacts their collegiate sense of belonging. This observation is substantiated by the military learners who participated in the study.

Academic employment amplifies sense of belonging. All study participants reported increased feelings of belonging after academic employment as tutors. They articulated the importance of their new identity as a tutor and responded positively to team membership, shared mission, and collegiality experienced in the campus learning center.

Burgess et al. (2016) observed that membership, in a campus community, functioned as a building block to the establishment of sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) highlighted that sense of belonging is an important influence on student success, especially for students with distinct cultural identities. Hurtado (Strayhorn, 2012) observed the beneficial impact of belonging to community “niches” on campus. Smaller communities within the campus enabled students who enter higher education with strongly developed cultural identities to establish a sense of belonging and institutional fit (Strayhorn, 2012). In the case of the military learners in this study, engagement in academic employment as a tutor positively impacted their perceived sense of belonging on campus. Tutoring afforded them an opportunity to connect to a campus

community, provided a place where they mattered to others on campus and broadened their perception of belonging.

Engagement Practices of Military Learners

This section provides an examination of findings related to the second and fourth research questions put forward in Chapter One that sought to explore the perceptions of military learners and their engagement practices on post-secondary institutions prior to and after their involvement in academic employment. Research question two: *What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?* Research question four: *How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?*

Military learners experience low levels of engagement. Participants described campus experiences in terms of two categories, military and academic. All participants perceived a duality of military and academic culture as a result of being military learners. Participants compartmentalized their experiences and defined military culture and academic culture with distinct principles and philosophies, clearly articulating an estrangement between the two.

Study participants highlighted experiences with peers prior to academic employment. They noted that age and life differences placed a barrier between them and their campus peers. ROTC members, active duty National Guards, Reservists, and veterans described their interactions with peers differently. Their perceived barriers varied by military affiliation and resulted in differences in engagement practices on campus. Veteran and active duty National Guard and Reservists regarded military experiences and their military identity as a barrier which reduced their campus engagement. ROTC participants, on the other hand, believed their military affiliation did not lessen their ability to engage with campus peers.

Although the participants in this study responded differently in relationship to their military affiliation, there were common themes that emerged from the focus group sessions. Only three of the 13 participants responded positively regarding their relationship and interaction with faculty members. With the exception of faculty characterized as “military friendly,” other faculty members were described in negative tones. All participants agreed that a disconnection existed between them and their faculty. For ROTC or National Guard or Reservists, faculty interactions were dominated by outside military obligations and were influenced by concerns with class absences and missed assignments due to military duties, and were tainted by feelings of misunderstanding and unfair treatment.

All participants indicated low levels of involvement on campus. National Guard or Reservist students indicated their campus engagement was negatively impacted by outside military commitments which conflicted with in classroom and outside classroom opportunities. For veteran participants, campus involvements were impacted by their deeply rooted military identity, age, family commitments, and commuter status. National Guard and Reservists responded similarly to the veteran participants. The only campus involvement mentioned by these participants were intramural sports, and those were a few. Although ROTC participants expressed higher frequency in engagement prior to academic employment, they also noted some barriers to their establishment of campus engagement practices due to frequent military obligations.

Academic employment amplifies military learner engagement practices. Participants indicated a positive relationship between academic employment as tutors and their engagement practices on campus. Participants perceived amplified engagement activities as a result of academic employment. They attributed their roles as a tutors and academic employment for their

increased interactions with campus peers. Participants recognized the important role academic employment as a tutor had on their campus experiences. Further, they attributed academic employment as transforming peer and campus engagement and articulated changes to their academic identity, expanded friendships, and greater social connections as a result of becoming tutors.

The literature on academic employment, although not focused on military learners, substantiates the beneficial nature of academic employment on engagement practices. Keup's (2016) analysis revealed that peer leaders engaged in academic employment regarded significant change in their undergraduate experiences and perceived an increased frequency of interactions with peers and faculty. Calma and Eggins (2012) noted the beneficial impact of tutoring on behalf of the tutor. They observed that peer connections tutors make during tutoring activities positively impacted the higher education experience and provided the tutor increased opportunities for engagement and interaction with campus peers (Calma & Eggins, 2012). Keup (2016) and Calma and Eggins (2012) findings are consistent with the narrative data shared by the military learners who participated in the study. They credited academic employment as a catalyst for increased engagement practices and a greater sense of belonging.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study has several delimitations and limitations that should be considered when connecting study findings to a larger context. First, the inclusion of only one institution lessened the scope of the study. Similarly, all participants were employed by one campus learning center, limiting the scope to all campus tutoring or learning centers. Second, the participants were employed in only one category of academic employment as tutors, while there remain many other academic support positions on campus such as mentors, orientation assistants, and

undergraduate teaching and research assistants. Third, the population of military learners that studied was limited in size, and all identified their gender as male. This resulted in a study that did not include female military learners, thus decreasing the generalization to a larger undergraduate population.

In addition, as primary investigator, I currently serve as center director, and the moderator is the assistant director of the campus learning center that employed the participants in the study. Although I am not the direct supervisor of the participants, I am often involved in hiring and training practices. The moderator serves as the supervisor of the participants who are currently employed in this study. Although this can be considered a limitation of researcher bias, our inclusion enhanced the focus group process. Due to the distinct nature of the military experience and cultural and identity barriers that military learners bring to higher education, familiarity intensified the communication and interaction between participants in the focus group sessions. I observed the establishment of a comradery between participants which resulted in enhanced verbal and non-verbal communication within the group.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Higher education researchers have studied the impact of engagement practices on the perceived sense of belonging and academic success of college students (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Milem & Berger, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2015; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Their research substantiated a relationship between sense of belonging and engagement through campus activities for non-traditional and first-generation populations (Kahu, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2012). A review of current research indicated military learners share characteristics of these at-risk student groups and similarly experience lower levels of academic,

faculty, and peer engagement in comparison to other campus peers (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; Cole & Kim, 2014; Cook & Kim, 2009).

There remains a gap in our understanding concerning the sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in post-secondary environments. Studies have focused on other at-risk student groups but there is a noteworthy absence of research published on the relationship of military learners, engagement practices, and their perceived sense of belonging. This study explored how military learners perceived and experienced higher education environments. This study also examined connections between academic employment, sense of belonging, and engagement.

Further research is recommended to extend this study to other campuses and other military learners engaged in academic employment. This research should broaden to include more participants, recruit female participants and increase the types of academic employment positions studied to include other peer leaders such as mentors, orientation assistants, residence hall advisors and research or teaching assistants.

Beyond the scope of military learners, this research should extend to other marginalized student groups that hold academic employment positions at ECU as well as other campuses. Further research is recommended regarding the similarities of military learners and other marginalized student groups. This research can serve to broaden our understanding how academic employment impacts student sense of belonging and engagement practices on campus.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Policy

The following implications and recommendations are based on the outcomes of this study. These are provided for administrators, faculty, and educational leaders involved in the

planning and implementation of programs and support services designed to promote military learner academic success.

Increase Campus Support Services

In the case of military learners, the scope of support services on our campuses has primarily emphasized “military friendly” policies which ultimately fail to fully address their academic, personal, and social needs (Green & Van Dusen, 2012). While support services can greatly enhance the opportunity for military learners to achieve academic success and campus engagement, higher education leadership is challenged to implement support policies and services that create campus environments in which military learners can be academically and socially successful (Green & Van Dusen, 2012). Participants in this study reported positive perceptions of G.I. Bill educational benefits and campus support services. Despite receiving beneficial programs and services, participants remained socially and culturally separate from their campus peers. There is more to be done to support military learner success at ECU and on other campuses. Rising numbers of military learners must act as facilitators for new policies and creative solutions to better address the social and cultural needs of this student population.

Expand Faculty Education and Awareness

Military learners have trouble establishing relationships and communicating with faculty as a result of military experiences. Their defined military culture negatively impacts the ability of military learners to form engagement practices in and out of the classroom. Lower levels of faculty engagement were substantiated by the participants in the study’s focus group sessions.

Although the responses provided by study participants resonate in current literature, I expected a different perception of faculty and related engagement practices as a result of academic employment. There are high academic performance standards for a student to be

selected as a tutor. It is reasonable to expect that high-achieving military learners, hired as tutors, would express frequent and positive encounters with faculty in their discipline. The participants reported very little change in their communication and interactions with faculty following academic employment. Regardless of military affiliation, the participants perceived negative communication and experienced difficulties when interacting and engaging with faculty members.

Higher education leadership must educate and inform campus stakeholders regarding the needs and cultural influences impacting military learners. Higher education leaders need to support student veteran awareness programming so that faculty, staff, and student peers can gain a sense of military culture, recognize the unique needs of active duty military learners and improve their social and political tolerance and understanding.

Increase Academic Employment Opportunities

Consistent with the literature and what we know of the beneficial outcomes of increased frequency of campus engagement practices, the significant finding of this research study is the positive impact focus group participants perceived from their academic employment as tutors at the campus learning center. For all military learners in this study, academic employment and their role as a tutor increased their frequency of interactions with campus peers. The final recommendation for higher education leadership is to explore and broaden opportunities for campus-based academic employment for military learners. If more campuses purposely recruited and employed military learners, we could expect similar engagement outcomes.

Conclusion

This study explored how military learners employed as tutors experience and perceive sense of belonging and engagement. This study illuminated the experiences and influences that

impact their perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in higher education. This study intended to extend our comprehension of the experiences which influence military learners and ascertain if academic employment impacted their perception of belonging and engagement with faculty, peers and campus.

This study broadens our knowledge of military learners who engage in academic employment and reveals new insight into the impact of their employment and post-secondary experiences. This study extends Strayhorn's work on sense of belonging to military learners engaged in academic employment. Focus group sessions were held to illicit the perceptions of military learners, providing a voice to their experiences and feelings in regard to college life and employment. Based on the findings of this study, military learners perceived a positive impact on their sense of belonging and engagement practices as a result of academic employment as tutors. Adding to the current research on military learners, this study uncovered a new intersection in the support of these college students: sense of belonging, engagement, and academic employment.

The overall purpose of this research study was two-fold. First, the research sought to deepen our understanding of military learners, recognizing the impact of their growing enrollment in today's higher education institutions. Second, the research intended to expand our conception of military learners and encourage future research regarding the relationship between academic employment, sense of belonging, and engagement practices of military learners and other marginalized student groups.

Educational researchers have observed differences in the manner in which military learners and their non-military peers encounter and experience institutions of higher education. There remains a gap in our understanding of engagement and sense of belonging of military

learners enrolled in post-secondary education. This study intended to extend our knowledge of the sense of belonging and engagement of military learners. By examining connections between academic employment, sense of belonging, and engagement practices; the study explored the ways military learners perceive and experience higher education.

Most importantly, this study sought to make the voices of military learners heard and increase our knowledge of their collegiate experiences. In focus group sessions, participants openly shared their perceived military and campus identities, how they related to faculty and peers, and in what ways they experienced academic life. Study participants noted the important impact academic employment as a tutor has had on their campus experience. They credited academic employment as a catalyst for increased engagement practices and a greater sense of belonging. Their words were powerful and spoke of deeper campus belonging, a new shared sense of purpose and mission, and the establishment of a new academic identity on campus.

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APPENDIX A: INSITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · www.ecu.edu/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Elizabeth Coghill](#)
CC: [David Siegel](#)
Date: 4/11/2017
Re: [UMCIRB 17-000653](#)
Military Learners

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 4/10/2017 to 4/9/2018. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Coghill Dissertation Proposal.docx	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Demographic Survey.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Focus Group Session Reminder.docx	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Informed Consent	Consent Forms
Interview Protocol.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Sample Email Invitation.docx	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Sample Phone Invitation.docx	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

UMCIRB 17-000653

East Carolina University



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: *The Impact of Academic employment on the Sense of Belonging and Engagement of Military Learners on the College Campus*

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Coghill

Institution, Department or Division: Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, East Carolina University

Address: 2300 Old Cafeteria Complex, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858

Telephone #: 252-737-2011

Study Coordinator: Dr. David Siegel, Dissertation Chair

Telephone #: 252-328-2828

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You are being invited to participate in this research because you are currently or have been enrolled as a military learner at East Carolina University between the years of 2014 and 2017 and are currently or have been employed as a tutor between the years of 2014 and 2017. The purpose of this research is to explore the effect of on academic employment on the sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners. By doing this research, we hope to learn about the collegiate experiences of military learners and your role as a tutor. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn four questions: 1) What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging? 2) What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices? 3) How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education? 4) How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about twenty people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

You should not take part in this research if you are not a military learner at East Carolina University, either currently or between the years of 2014 and 2017 and who has been employed or is currently employed as a tutor between the years of 2014 and 2017.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at East Carolina University in a conference room adjacent to the Pirate Academic Success Center. You will need to come to the conference room 1632 one time during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 60 to 90 minutes during one focus group session held in April or May 2017.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following: complete a demographic survey and participate in a focus group which will be audio recorded. The focus group session will last between 60 and 90 minutes and will involve between four to eight participants. The focus group session will be observed by the principal investigator and moderated by the co-investigator, Mr. Dexter Sharp.

The focus group session will be audio recorded using two digital recording devices. The audio recording is for the purpose of accurately transcribing the dialogue shared. The transcript of the focus group session will be typed and no identifying information such as your name will be transcribed. Transcriptions will be prepared by an outside transcriber to the research team. Once the focus group sessions are typed, you will be offered the opportunity to review and respond to the transcription document by email correspondence with the principal investigator, Elizabeth Coghil. The transcripts will be stored electronically on a secure server at East Carolina University, accessed only by the principal investigator or members of the research team.

Once the transcripts have been approved by the focus group members, and the researchers are satisfied that all pertinent information from the focus group session has been captured, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. You will, however, receive a \$15 gift card to Sheetz at the completion of the interview.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research. If needed, you will be provided a parking pass by the study investigator.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Participant Name: _____

Today's Date: ____/____/____

1. What would you describe your gender?
 Male Female Transgender

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?
 African American/Black
 Asian/Pacific Islander
 White/Non-Hispanic
 Hispanic
 Latino
 Multi-racial
 Would rather not say
 Other _____

3. What best classifies your age?
 18 to 25 years of age
 26 to 30 years of age
 30 and older

4. Which of the following best describes your military service?
 Active ROTC member
 Veteran, separated from military service
 Active National Guard or Reserves
 Active in both National Guard or Reserves and ROTC

5. What branch of military service are you identified with?
 Army Navy Air Force Marine
 Coast Guard

6. What is your rank currently or when you separated from duty?

7. Have you ever been deployed outside of the United States? If so where and how many times?
 No
 Yes, _____

8. What best describes your current classification at ECU?
 Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate
 Alumnus

9. Have you ever attended another institution of higher education (college or university)?
 Yes No
10. Have you ever attended a community college?
 Yes No
11. What best describes your status in your first semester at ECU?
 Freshman, first semester in college
 Transfer student
12. What is your major program of study?

13. Have you ever used GI educational benefits to attend college?
 YES NO
14. Are you using GI educational benefits at this time?
 YES NO
15. In what semester and calendar year did you first become a tutor? _____
16. What type of tutoring roles have you held at the Pirate Academic Success Center?
 Lead Tutor Daytime Tutor Peer Tutor

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title: *The Impact of Academic employment on the Sense of Belonging and Engagement of Military*

Learners on the College Campus

Brief Description of Project:

This study will explore how military learners employed as tutors experience and perceive sense of belonging and engagement in post-secondary education institutions. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore the experiences and influences that impact the perceptions of sense of belonging and engagement practices of military learners in higher education. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their sense of belonging?
2. What campus experiences do military learners identify as associated with their engagement practices?
3. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their sense of belonging in post-secondary education?
4. How does the academic employment of military learners shape their engagement practices in post-secondary education?

Date:

Place:

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Coghill

Introduction: Hello, my name is Elizabeth Coghill and I am conducting a research study as a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership department at East Carolina University. I am joined by Mr. Dexter Sharp who will serve as the moderator of today's focus group. Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's focus group session. At this point I will be recording the focus group with two digital recorders (**start devices**).

You have been selected to participate in today's focus group because you have been identified as someone with a great deal to share about the experiences of military learners on the East Carolina University campus. My research study explores the relationship of the academic employment of military learners and their perceived sense of belonging and engagement

practices. Through this study I hope to gain insight into the experiences of military learners and better understand the development of sense of belonging and engagement on the college campus. Your responses are very important and I will make every effort to capture everything that you say in response to the group questions.

I will be taking some written notes along with the audio recording. All of your responses will be confidential, and only a pseudonym will be utilized when transcribing or analyzing your responses. The focus group session will take between 60 and 90 minutes. If at any time you do not want to continue to participate in the focus group you may simply state your wish to discontinue as a participant without any penalty.

As the investigator in this study, only I will have access to the recordings of this focus group and the recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed. Once the focus group is transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review the document and provide feedback on the focus group transcript. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the focus group session, you may email me or you may contact my dissertation advisor Dr. David Siegel. Our contact information is available as a part of your copy of the consent form that you signed before beginning the focus group session.

I have prepared a series of questions starting with a brief demographic survey. (**Provide demographic survey and collect**)

Moderator: In today's focus group session I will be asking you twelve questions regarding your experiences here at East Carolina University. As moderator, I may follow up with probing questions like, *Could you tell me more about that?* or *What exactly did you mean by that?* in order to illicit more information.

I'd like to begin today's session by having everyone introduce themselves, state your major, military affiliation, and what subject you tutor or have tutored at the Pirate Academic Success Center.

Focus Group Questions:

1. What motivated you to pursue a college education at East Carolina University?
2. How have your military experiences impacted you as a student at ECU?
3. How would you describe your relationship or connection to your peers in your first semester of classes?
4. How would you describe your relationship or connection to your peers now?
5. How would you describe your relationship or connection to your faculty in your first semester of classes?
6. How would you describe your relationship or connection to your faculty now?
7. What campus activities are you involved in? (This can be any campus activity outside of your class lectures.) How, if in any way, has these activities contributed to your campus experiences at ECU?
8. How would you describe your role as a tutor in regards to faculty, peers and ECU?
9. What impact, if any, do you think being a tutor has made in your feelings of connection to the university?
10. What impact, if any, do you think being a tutor has made in your feelings of connection to your peers?
11. What impact, if any, do you think being a tutor has made in your feelings of connection to faculty at ECU?
12. Is there anything you would like to share about your experiences as a student we have not talked about?

This concludes the focus group session today. Do you have any questions for me?

As a reminder, you will receive an email from me with the transcript of this session. At that point, I welcome any feedback from you regarding that transcript. When the study is completed, I will be happy to share the outcomes of the research with you if you are interested. Thank you so much for your participation today.

APPENDIX E: SAMPLE EMAIL INVITATION

Dear _____:

I hope this email finds you well. I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in a focus group session as a part of the research I am conducting as a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program here at ECU. This research has been approved by the ECU Institutional Research Board.

My research is focused on the higher education experiences of military learners like yourself and academic employment as tutors. I hope that you will consider participating in an upcoming focus group session. A focus group is a small group discussion where you will join with four to eight other students and answer questions about your experiences in college.

Are you available so that we could discuss my research project in more detail? If so, please respond to this email.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Coghill

APPENDIX F: SAMPLE PHONE INVITATION

Hello, may I speak with _____?

I am calling to you today to invite you to participate in a focus group session as a part of the research I am conducting as a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program here at ECU.

My research is focused on the higher education experiences of military learners like yourself and academic employment as tutors. I hope that you will consider participating in an upcoming focus group session. A focus group is a small group discussion where you will join with four to eight other students and answer questions about your experiences in college.

Would you be willing to participate in an upcoming focus group?

If yes:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research study! I have three focus group sessions scheduled in this month. (Provide focus group times) Will one of these work in your schedule? Wonderful, I will be contacting as a reminder you as we get closer to the date by both email and phone. Can you provide the email address you would like me to use? Thank you, I'll be sending you some additional information about the study today by email and will be in contact with you as we get closer to the focus group session date. Will you need a parking pass to park on campus? If needed, I will have a parking pass ready for you when your session is scheduled.

I appreciate your willingness to participate. I'll be in contact soon.

If No,

Thank you for spending a few minutes with me today.

Answering machine:

This message is for _____. This is Mrs. Coghill. If you could call me back at 252-737-2011 at your earliest convenience I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.
Have a great day.

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP SESSION REMINDER

Email Reminder 1

Dear _____,

I am writing to you today to remind you that you are scheduled to participate in a focus group session next week on _____ at ___ o'clock in conference room 1632 located in the Old Cafeteria Complex. This room is adjacent to the Pirate Academic Success Center on the ECU campus. Please arrive ten minutes prior to the start of the focus group session so that I can review the consent to participate letter with you. I expect the focus group session to be between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Your involvement in this research study is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions regarding the focus group process or need a parking pass for campus parking, please call me at 252-737-2011 or email me at coghille@ecu.edu.

See you tomorrow!

Mrs. Coghill

Email Reminder 2

Dear _____,

I am writing to you today to remind you of tomorrow's focus group session at ___ o'clock in conference room 1632 located in the Old Cafeteria Complex. This room is adjacent to the Pirate Academic Success Center on the ECU campus. Please arrive ten minutes prior to the start of the focus group session so that I can review the *consent to participate in research* letter with you.

If you have any questions regarding the focus group process, or need a parking pass to park on campus please call me at 252-737-2011 or email me at coghille@ecu.edu.

See you tomorrow! Mrs. Coghill

By Phone

Hello, may I speak with _____?

I am calling to you today to remind you of the focus group session scheduled for today at ___ o'clock in conference room 1632 located in the Old Cafeteria Complex. Do you have any questions about the focus group process or my research study? Will you need a parking pass to park on campus? Thank you in advance for your help today.

Answering Machine

This message is for _____. This is Mrs. Coghill. If you could call me back at 252-737-2011 at your earliest convenience I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk with you. Have a great day.

