ABSTRACT

MAY, CATELIN MARGARET “MAGGIE” JONES. MilSpouseEd: Ethnographic representation of military spouses’ educational journeys. (Under the direction of Dr. Michelle Bartlett, Committee Chair).

Military spouses’ access to education is greatly impacted by the demands of their unique and often complex lifestyles. If postsecondary education leaders had a greater understanding of this population and their needs, challenges, and successes, they could cultivate an environment of learning rooted in student success, accessibility, and equity. Doing so would limit the challenges of accessing education and shape the culture of learning within this population.

This ethnographic qualitative study’s theoretical framework comprised Boss’s theory of ambiguous loss and Baxter Magdola’s learning principle model of self-authorship. Significant literature on the psychological interventions of student belonging indicated the need for this research. The participating active-duty military spouses discussed their success in accessing higher education, enabling a better understanding of this student population within the postsecondary education system. The findings indicated three major themes: barriers, desires, and supporting roles. Active-duty Army military spouses have barriers when accessing higher education and continuing lifelong learning, while dually retraining for employment opportunities that meet their unique and complex lifestyles (e.g., frequent Permanent Change of Duty Station moves and a lack of support services and groups). The second major theme included ideas about enhancing active-duty Army military spouses’ educational journey regarding access to higher education and student learning outcomes. There is a need for a sense of belonging on campus among the military spouse student population, flexibility in course offerings, and Hy-Flex attendance policies to access courses remotely. The study’s findings suggest the need for the student service support staff on post to provide an Army education liaison well-versed in active
military scholarships, transfer credits, and program offerings from area colleges. The third theme was the military spouse’s role as a helper to their military member’s career. At one point, all participants actively engaged in developing their respective family readiness groups, taking time away from their professional goals to help build their spouses’ careers. Although outside of the study’s scope, this finding shows community perceptions useful to understand this growing student population in higher education.
MilSpouseEd: Ethnographic Representation of Military Spouses’ Educational Journeys

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Adult and Community College Education

Raleigh, North Carolina
2022

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DEDICATION

To Mason, Maddox, and Lizzie Grace—I love you babes to the moon and back. Being your mom is the best chapter of my life.
BIOGRAPHY

Years ago, I found myself pregnant with twins in a hospital room, undergoing a medical trial to give my boys their best chance at survival. Danny was a butter bar LT fresh out of Ranger school and deployed to Iraq with little communication, bringing the fight in Operation Inherent Resolve while leading other mothers’ sons in combat. Though our missions differed, we were both committed to bringing our boys home.

The days were long and grueling. In my darkest moments, I relied on my village of military spouses, family, and faith. These women sat with me, sent me magazines, and prayed for me. When the twins and I returned home, they brought diapers, meals, and wine, always with a smile and a sense of selfless service. Since then, I have hosted Thanksgiving dinners for those who cannot make it home for the holidays, celebrated birthdays among the ranks, and thrown my fair share of baby showers and wine parties. I have volunteered to review resumes, fill out college applications, served as a reference, and babysit children while military wives applied for jobs. I have witnessed their successes, struggles, and challenges, held their confidence and their babies while dreaming of a day I could make a difference in their lives.

The role of the military spouse is often seen as the hardest job in the Military: overworked, underpaid or unemployed, and viewed as a dependent. This research hit home for me. We can influence opportunities for military spouses to access education, affecting many military households for generations to come. In true Army wife fashion (although I am now only the former), I salute the readers of this dissertation to shape the student success outcomes of military spouses as we embark on the exciting calling of becoming voices for heroes of the home front.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thank you to Dr. Michelle Bartlett, my dissertation chair and biggest cheerleader, who went over and beyond to ensure I knew I mattered. Our Zoom calls varied from lengthy conversations on my topic, tears over IRB and the COVID-19 pandemic, to simple and gracious statements of encouragement while my children’s yogurt-covered smiles and cheers ran through the Zoom frame. Dr. Bartlett, your leadership, mentorship, and compassion for your students is a true calling. You have my utmost respect for the ways and means you can truly connect with those around you and possess a grace under pressure that we can all learn from.

My admiration, respect, and special thank you to the military spouses—heroes of the home front—who shared their stories with me to make this work possible. I hope what we have done will go on to shape the lives and culture within the Military community. Thank you for your time—I know it is limited—your support that has touched my heart, and your abounding efforts.

To my Charlotte cohort mates of 2020, I have truly enjoyed spending the last 2 years with you (most of which was on Zoom and our fav Slack Chat due to COVID-19 pandemic). I will never forget our first in-person meeting and how much the meeting moved me. I am honored to call you all my friends. Kristen, Talitha, and Sonia—you have been the most amazing friends. “Team Specs”—you guys are brilliant, and I have truly enjoyed watching your team achieve goals. “Team Nuggets”—Wow, you all serve as the professional and friendship goals for the rest of us. James, Monica, Bradley, Amy, and Kelli—I believe I speak for our cohort when I say, “We’ve emailed you all our vitas; please give them a gander.” Nathaniel, Dawn, and Alma—I have so much respect for your service to the North Carolina Community College System. I have been so blessed to have shared this experience with you all.
To my Mom, Dad, and Aunt Shan—you guys have had my back through it all. I know you cried when I cried, felt the stress just by my voice on the other end of the phone, and when I left an old life behind during this process, you never judged me, only provided unconditional love and welcomed me back home. Mom and Aunt Shan, you are the most amazing women I have ever known. You love hard, yet also possess an array of Southern slang that indicates when I need to get my butt off my shoulders; I believe that is a rare and truest form of love. “Thank you” is not even close to being enough, but I hope my love, respect, and admiration are a start.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Army military spouses’ educational journeys are greatly impacted by the demands of their unique and often complex lifestyles (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Military spouses are a transient population that endures multiple relocations, separation from support systems, and the added stress of spousal deployments. These experiences might negatively impact military spouses’ employment histories and degree-seeking endeavors in traditional learning environments. Military veterans not negatively impacted by the military lifestyle upon separation largely credit their success to partnerships that focus on relevant skills. Among these partnerships are military-to-career translators, such as CareerOneStop and Hire Heroes, and partnerships for facilitating veteran employment, such as USAJobs and MilitaryOneSource (Davis & Minnis, 2017). There has been significant focus on the need to foster military veterans’ transferable skills, yet little scholarly research on military spouses (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Additional research is needed on how the military lifestyle affects military spouses seeking employment and educational opportunities. Military spouses’ unique circumstances could present barriers to higher education access, further contributing to inequitable outcomes and disparities for this potential student population.

Over the last 10 years, extensive research has shown that educational institution leaders have made strides in understanding the military student population, especially war veterans (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). However, the research has focused on the military student population, not the military spouse student population (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Ford et al., 2009; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Lewis, 2020; McBain, 2008). To address the limited literature on military spouse education, this study was a means to identify the best practices for postsecondary educational leaders to understand this unique student population.
The military spouse population consists of more than one million individuals and includes service members from Active-Duty, National Guard, and Reserve Forces. There are more than 15 million military veteran spouses and an estimated 5.8 million surviving spouses of veterans (Bradbard et al., 2016; see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1**

*The Force Behind the Force*

As shown in Figure 1.1, nearly one million military spouses in the United States have spouses with active-duty orders or National Guard service (Bradbard et al., 2016). When including military veteran spouses, the population increases to nearly 15 million, with an average age of 33 years. Ninety-three percent of military spouses are women, and 74% have children under 18 at home. Military spouses are 10 times more likely than their civilian counterparts to relocate in any year (Bradbard et al., 2016).
The transience of military spouses indicates the need for cultural and institutional change to recruit and retain military spouses as higher education students (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Scholars should research military spouses’ access to higher education and retraining opportunities, which shape their educational journeys, through innovative means such as self-authorship (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012), distance education, and physiological interventions, such as belonging (Lewis, 2020). Army spouses often relocate abruptly due to a permanent change of duty station (PCS; Trail et al., 2019). The military spouse lifestyle includes frequent geographical moves that could negatively impact career development and persistence with higher education opportunities (Bonura & Lovald, 2015; Borah & Fina, 2017; Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Cooney et al., 2010; Eubanks, 2013; Eversole, 2017; Lewis, 2020; Trail et al., 2019). One third of military spouses experience PCS and relocate yearly (Trail et al., 2019). Other life stressors, including spousal deployment, childcare challenges, and family obligations, mean many military spouses cannot fulfill their educational goals due to a lack of the resources needed for positive student outcomes (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).

According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), there are 641,639 active-duty military spouses in the United States (Tong et al., 2018). Of this population, 92% are women with an unemployment rate three times higher than the national average. Frequent relocation and inconsistent work–life balance are significant challenges for the military spouse population (Trail et al., 2019). Research on military spouse’s educational journeys including access to higher education and retraining opportunities that meet the needs and demands of this unique student populations’ culture and lifestyle could provide a new perspective on this student population’s needs. Harrell et al. (2004) found that 89% of the military spouse population has some college education; however, only 30% have 5-year degrees, and 15% have advanced degrees.
Significantly, this study was an opportunity to shape the postsecondary educational culture and its impact on military spouse student outcomes. Active-duty military spouses enter many different occupations (see Figure 1.2). Higher Education leaders could use the data to better equip this student population and understand the labor markets these students are most likely to enter.

Figure 1.2

Military Spouse Occupations


Bradbard and Armstrong (2016) surveyed military spouses’ occupations (see Figure 1.2). Knowledge of military spouses’ education was vital to this study and future research to develop collaborations and partnerships between institutions of postsecondary education and employers
to serve the active-duty military spouse community better. Office administration and support positions are the most popular among active-duty military spouses, followed by sales, education, and training (Bradbard et al., 2016).

Background of the Problem

Little higher education research has addressed the factors that provide and enable educational access to military spouses. Postsecondary educational institutions lack an understanding of military culture, which could negatively impact military spouse students’ opportunities for academic success.

The military spouse population represents a small segment of society and consists of nearly 700,000 individuals. Due to lifestyles, cultures, and frequent relocations, military spouses are less likely to be educated and employed than their civilian counterparts (Harrell et al., 2019). Of the 471,990 active-duty military members, there are 239,873 spouses and 409,862 children; thus, 42% of active-duty military members are married with children. Of this population, 41% of military families have children under 5 years old. Eighty-nine percent of military spouses have some college education, while 30% of the spouses have 4-year degrees. Military spouses are three times more likely to be unemployed than their civilian counterparts, and one third of them relocate yearly. Another barrier to higher education is that large land lots and military airspace demands often require military posts in locations with poor bandwidth and remote from civilian airports, highways, and tourism, including schools (Trail et al., 2019).

The high unemployment of active-duty military spouses affects family incomes and earnings, further stressing the transient military lifestyle and spouses’ disproportionate household responsibilities due to servicemember training and deployments (Bradbard et al., 2016; see
Figure 1.3). There is economic strain on families, particularly those with young children and frequent relocations.

**Figure 1.3**

*Military Spouse Earnings*

![Military Spouse Earnings Chart]


Civilian spouses in the United States make an average of $41,920 a year, while Armed Forces spouses make an average of $25,938 (Bradbard et al., 2016). Civilian spouses who moved to new locations in 2015 saw a decrease in earnings from $42,920 to $36,740 a year. The disparity in income and earnings indicates the need to research military spouse employment to improve equitable outcomes, education access, and labor market outcomes.

According to the DoD (2020), most military members live in on-post housing, which can contribute to the further exclusion of military spouses from mainstream society. The unique military culture, which remains isolated from mainstream America, suggests the need to tell military spouses’ stories and perspectives on attaining higher education, focusing on the socioeconomic divide between enlisted military and officer spouses (Ott et al., 2019). Despite
doctoral-level ethnographic research on military spouses, there is little literature on military
spouses as a higher education student population. Thus, there is a need for additional research on
this growing student population, including their higher education stories and successes.

Problem Statement

Military spouses’ unemployment rate is three times higher than the national civilian
average (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). The 2009 National Leadership Summit on Military
Families indicated the necessity for higher education institution leaders to address this diverse
military student population’s needs (Booth et al., 2009). Military veterans are an at-risk student
population at higher education institutions (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Lewis, 2020; Molina &
Morse, 2017) with similar backgrounds and lifestyles as military members. Therefore, higher
education institutions should provide the appropriate attention and support services needed for
their academic success (Lewis, 2020). Figure 1.4 shows the military spouse unemployment rate
from 2000–2012 compared to their civilian counterparts. Military spouses face inequitable
differences and challenges accessing higher education and workforce opportunities.
Historically, military spouses have had significantly higher unemployment rates than their civilian counterparts (Bradbard et al., 2016). The unemployment rate across the United States remained around 5% from 2000 to 2008. However, the military spouse unemployment rate ranged from 15% to 20% during those years, with an all-time high of 35% in 2004, which aligned with the U.S. insurgency plans, the Iraq invasion, and the Iraq War.

Institution leaders must examine the factors related to military spouses and their higher education access to overcome educational inequities and a lack of access for this student population. Without further research, this student population might not complete their degrees and face inequities in the workforce and the intersectionality of oppression within society.
**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore active-duty Army spouses’ stories of higher education access to discover their higher education successes, challenges, and inequities. This research provided an understanding of military spouse student culture while accessing higher education and undergoing lifelong learning experiences while retraining for employment opportunities that are applicable to the needs and demands of their unique lifestyles. The study’s data could be useful for reducing inequities in higher education access and academic outcomes. This research could contribute to increased accessibility for military spouses through increased higher education access, improved labor market outcomes, and a more inclusive culture. Postsecondary educational leaders could use this study to understand military spouses and their needs, challenges, and successes. Institution leaders could use the findings to cultivate a learning environment for this population rooted in student success, accessibility, and equity.

**Research Question**

The study had the following research question: What are the stories around factors in learning of Army active-duty military spouses achieving academic success in higher education?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study’s theoretical framework comprised the ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2007) and the learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda, 2004). The ambiguous loss theory applies to military spouses’ struggles and everyday lives. Military spouses experience ambiguous loss throughout their lives due to deployments, reintegration of military members into the family, military members’ negative psychological situations that affect the family during reintegration, and domestic workload imbalance (Boss, 2007; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012).
The learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda, 2004) was the lens used to explore self-authorship strategies. Educators can use the model to access students’ experiences professionally, personally, and academically to improve learning outcomes and create effective learning environments. Figure 1.5 presents the uses of self-authorship, student engagement, and assessment, whether self-authorship techniques enable students to participate in course materials, and the outcomes of these class activities (Pizzolato, 2010).

Pizzolato (2010) researched self-authorship in the classroom and found that students were more likely to participate in classwork and assignments when they had autonomy. Students produce quality work when they feel connected to the assignment and practice decision-making for topic choices. The military spouse lifestyle can affect the learning process; therefore, developing curricula for nontraditional students, such as military spouses, could contribute to self-actualization (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012). Baxter Magolda’s (2004) learning partnership model presents effective strategies for promoting self-actualization, so “educators design learning environments and curricula that promote students’ development toward self-authorship” (p. 21). Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) researched coping strategies for military spouses during deployment, self-authorship, learning environment strategies, and military spouse resiliency. However, the literature lacks stories from the military spouse student population regarding higher education access.
Figure 1.5

*Self-Authorship*

![Diagram showing test-retest reliability and internal consistency for SAS subscales, including when authority makes decisions and when I make decisions for myself.]

**Boss Theory of Ambiguous Loss**

The ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2007) suggests that grieving is not final. The loss of a loved one could include a wake, funeral, and a death certificate that provides closure for the family; however, loss’s psychological (i.e., emotional) presence remains (Boss, 1999). Military families do not have a clear end to the grieving process during deployment (Boss, 2007; Mancini, 2019). Many military members return psychologically and physically changed, producing a feeling of loss for the family. Figure 1.6 shows how the ambiguous loss theory applies to the military family unit.

**Figure 1.6**

*Boss’s Theory of Ambiguous Loss*

![Diagram of ambiguous loss process](image)


Figure 1.6 is a visual representation of the ambiguous loss process. Loss begins when an action or situation causes a psychological disconnection between the family members—in this case, a military service member (Boss et al., 2017). One member of the family often decides how the members can demonstrate, feel, and see the loss, which causes varying degrees of stress and,
in most cases, a crisis. Often overlooked are the resources available to those suffering from ambiguous loss. Figure 1.7 shows the causes of ambiguous loss and how individuals can experience it based on the daily stressors and challenges active-duty military spouses face while attempting to access higher education, improve employment and earning opportunities, and navigate conflicted relationships at home.

Figure 1.7 presents the two ambiguous loss categories and examples of each. Ambiguous loss can occur as a physical absence with a psychological presence (Boss, 2016), which applies to most active-duty military spouses, who often experience ambiguous loss during war and deployment. Ambiguous loss can also occur with divorces, incarcerations, kidnapping, and empty-nester syndrome. Boss (2016) identified the second ambiguous loss category as a psychological absence with a physical presence. This type is common among family members of individuals who are in comas or have severe mental trauma or illness. The second category of ambiguous loss includes grief, which can apply to the active-duty military spouse community.
Figure 1.7

Ambiguous Loss and Military Family Stress


https://doi.org/10.1111/jfr.12152
The ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2007) is relevant to understanding the military spouse population, lifestyle, and culture. Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) used the theory to describe service members’ perpetual loss and reintegration into the family unit, which can cause significant stress. Understanding this stress could provide an understanding of the significant trauma military spouses regularly face. Specific to the study population, ambiguous loss can occur due to either physical absence or the physical presence of the military member and physiological absence due to trauma sustained in service (Boss, 2006; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Research on military spouses has focused on resilience and ambiguous loss theory to address multiple deployments and family unity disruption and reintegration (Easterling & Knox, 2010; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Rosetto, 2009), topics useful for understanding the military spouse student population.

**Researcher Role**

As the researcher, I acknowledge my connection to the study as an active-duty Army spouse. My ambitions and predisposition to the research arose from the personal challenges associated with the military spouse lifestyle while accessing higher education. I consider myself a part of the active-duty military spouse community. I serve as the Family Readiness Group (FRG) leader in the 82nd Airborne, 1-508 Able Company, where I advise and assist military spouses. I also serve as a volunteer leader for fundraising, event hosting, career advising, and morale-building.

I acknowledge my predisposition and innate biases due to my positionality as an active-duty Army military spouse, FRG leader, and graduate student. My positionality has impacted my interest in the subject matter and desire to effect change within the postsecondary educational culture. My goal for this research was to initiate change for the active-duty Army military spouse
student population. Although my experiences could have affected the interview questions, they enabled me to gain access to the participants. I maintained and did not compromise my or the study’s integrity.

In my role as the researcher, I knew of my positionality and remained aware of my influence on the research, participants, and study context. The questions I asked the participants were ones I often asked myself. For example, when is the right time to complete my degree? How can I manage and maintain my work-life balance with a spouse deployed? Where are the resources I can use to achieve academic success?

**Contributions to the Field**

This study embarks on an ethnographic study to better understand the culture of the military spouse. By analyzing their stories, lived and learned experiences from onset and rapid deployment cycles, extended and unpredictable training cycles, to abrupt Permanent Change of Duty Station relocations, and work life imbalance create opportunities to get a glimpse into the culture and life of the military spouse. By gaining access as a cultural insider, given the researcher's role as an active-duty Army wife for 10 years, allows a unique contribution to the field allowing a traditional ethnographic study to be conducted by a cultural insider. This research will lay the groundwork for further studies to expand upon by providing insights into the unique and often complex lifestyles of military spouses as they access higher education, share lived and learned experiences, seek retraining opportunities that better meet the demands and needs given their unique culture.
**Definition of Terms**

*Access:* The extent to which students from diverse backgrounds have equitable opportunities to enroll, engage, and advance their student success outcomes (Lewis, 2020; Martinez & Hernández, 2018).

*Belonging:* A psychological intervention that impacts the student experience across student subpopulations and campus environments (Bragg, 2001; Martinez & Hernández, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).


*Dependents:* A part of a military member’s immediate family, such as a lawfully married spouse or a child (DoD, 2018).

*Duty station:* A military post or installation where the service member is assigned and reports (DoD, 2018).

*Family Readiness Group:* A command-sponsored organization of family members, volunteers, soldiers, and civilian employees associated with a particular unit within the United States Armed Forces (DOD, 2018).

*HyFlex:* The hybrid course format is an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning allowing participants to engage in a learning activity in-person, synchronously online, and/or asynchronously online (Seaman et al., 2018).

*Military spouse:* A person whose spouse (wife or husband) is a United States Armed Forces member.

*Permanent change of duty station:* Reassignment of the soldier and family to a new duty station location (Military OneSource, 2022).
**Psychological absence:** The loss felt from a family member’s physical presence but emotional unavailability (Boss, 1999, 2006, 2011, 2016).

**Physical absence:** The loss felt by families who do not know if their loved ones are dead or alive (Boss, 1999, 2006, 2011, 2016).

**Student success:** In this study, defined with the four Aspen Institute pillars of student success: teaching and learning, completion, labor market outcomes, and equity (The Aspen Institute, n.d.

**Limitations**

Scholars have not extensively researched the military spouse student population; therefore, the topic has a weaker theoretical framework than established topics in the field. The limited research on military spouses suggests the need for additional inquiry into military spouses’ educational access and career development (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Ott et al., 2019).

**Delimitations**

I am familiar with the participant population as an active-duty Army military spouse. I have an interest in the topic due to my positionality as a population insider (Holmes, 2020). The convenience sample of 10 active-duty military spouses with enlisted and officer spouses was a deliberate research element based on suggestions from other researchers (e.g., Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Ott et al., 2019).

**Assumptions**

A study assumption was that there would be education disparities between officer spouses and enlisted, active-duty military spouses. Another assumption was that there would be
disparities between officers and active-duty military spouses regarding age, socioeconomic status, and higher education access.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 presented the need for research on the military spouse student population. This study focused on the military spouse culture and its impact on military spouse higher education success with the ethnographic research methodology. Chapter 2 presents literature on military spouse culture. The chapter also addresses military spouses’ hardships and challenges in accessing education. An analysis of military spouse underemployment and unemployment rates will show this population’s socioeconomic challenges. Chapter 2 includes demographic research on gender, race, and education among military spouses to showcase their educational journeys, specifically how they need access to higher education, retraining opportunities, and equitable learning outcomes.

**Chapter 1 Summary**

Chapter 1 presented the study’s problem statement on military spouses’ educational journeys as they access higher education and retraining opportunities given their unique culture, the study topic, and the problem under study. There were discussions of the study’s purpose, theoretical framework, and overarching research question. Prioritizing the growing military spouse student population within postsecondary educational systems are needed. There is a lack of understanding by postsecondary educational leaders of military culture regarding education access and the need to be retrained for employment opportunities that meet the needs for their unique lifestyles.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the lack of research on military spouses, the reviewed literature includes mainly ethnographic studies. This ethnographic study was the first to present military spouses’ unique success stories in accessing higher education. This study offered an understanding of the military spouse student population and their unique culture, successes, and challenges to provide a foundation for additional research. Understanding the military culture could enable higher education leaders to create support systems for military spouses (Chadwick, 2018; Gonzalez, 2021; Lewis, 2020).

The second phase of the literature review presents the study’s theoretical framework of the ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2004, 2006, 2007), the self-authorship model (Baxter Magolda, 2000, 2004), and the physiological inventions of belonging (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Due to the limited research on the military spouse population, this review includes two studies published by The RAND Corporation and the United States Census Bureau. Ethnography is a common research method for creating a new topic; therefore, it was the most suitable approach for this student population.

**Ethnographic Studies**

Researchers conduct ethnographic studies to understand cultural relationships, relational practices, or commonalities among values and shared experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Ethnographic studies are often a process and a product. Researchers write ethnographies to produce a thick description of a culture underrepresented in literature and society (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2001). Ethnographic researchers produce evidence through field notes, interviews, and artifact collection (Jorgenson, 2002). Different people possess different stories, characters, and modes of communication (Ellis, 2004). Therefore, researchers should consider moving toward
literature rather than physics by providing value-centered stories to analyze. Ellis (2004) was a qualitative researcher focusing on ethnographic and autoethnographic designs. With this approach, Ellis created a meaningful dialogue around subjects underrepresented or inaccessible with quantitative data analysis.

Ethnographic research has a basis in anthropology. However, the ethnographic design includes more than the art of storytelling through an analysis lens of common themes among subjects. Examples of ethnographic research with a storytelling lens of analysis include underrepresented populations or sensitive themes, such as sexuality (Tillman-Healy, 1998) and race relations (Hornsby-Minor, 2004).

**Ethnographic Critics**

Critics of ethnographic research believe that the qualitative methodology contributes to error and interpretation and is more unreliable than other data-driven approaches (Ellis et al., 2011; Holt, 2003; Spindler & Spindler, 1987). However, these critics have presented narrow-minded interpretations without considering the value and insight provided by alternative research approaches. This is especially true for research on transient populations, such as military spouses. Little research has included military spouses, and no scholars have focused on military spouses’ higher education access. This ethnographic multimedia study showed how to shape postsecondary educational institutions’ culture to better support this student population.

**Background of the Military Spouse**

In 2012, there were over 2.2 million active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard service members and 1.1 million military spouses. Two thirds of military spouses were married to active-duty service members (DoD, 2013). The National Military Family Association (2011) found that the military community comprised 1% of the U.S. population. The military spouse
population remains significantly underserved and has received little attention regarding higher education access in scholarly research (Ott et al., 2019).

Military spouses face different challenges than their civilian counterparts (National Military Family Association, 2011), including frequent relocations, deployments, service member reintegration, disruptive family units, and labor division disparities among spouses (Easterling & Knox, 2010; Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012; Rosetto, 2009). These unique challenges can be barriers to pursuing higher education (Harrell et al., 2004; Hayes, 2011; Maury & Stone, 2014; National Military Family Association, 2007). In any year, military spouses account for approximately 40% of the unemployment in the United States and are more likely to be unemployed or looking for work than civilians (Harrell et al., 2004). Demographics and lifestyles are common reasons for military spouses’ lack of employment (Harrell et al., 2004; National Military Family Association, 2007). Military spouses are often younger than the average civilian in the workforce and frequently relocate, making them less likely to be hired (Harrell et al., 2004).

Military spouses differ from their civilian counterparts regarding labor market outcomes. Military spouses are more likely to experience frequent long-distance relocations due to military reassignment (Gleiman & Swearengen, 2012) and apt to be younger adults with young children at home (Harrell et al., 2004). Many military posts are in rural, disconnected societies because mechanized units require large land plots for training. However, economic incentives have led to off-post military services, and military towns have had a shifting economic landscape. For example, Fayetteville surrounds Fort Bragg and is the fifth-largest city in North Carolina (United States Census Bureau, 2010).
Military spouses are increasingly likely to live in urban or metropolitan areas with access to and experience with communicating on online forums (Brown & Gross, 2011). Military spouses are a unique student population in higher education, as they often bring financial benefits, transfer credits, and continuing education training. Because they live around the world and have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and challenges, military spouses are a heterogeneous student population (Sherman et al., 2016). Higher education leaders can develop new strategies for equitable access for military spouses through technology and social media.

A significant challenge of military spouse employment also relates to the challenges of community access. In a study by Trail et al. (2019), military spouses identified frequent and disruptive moves as the cause of their unemployment, including service member absence, heavy parenting responsibilities, and childcare difficulties. Trail et al. (2019) surveyed military spouses to identify 96 common problems military spouses face. The top three categories the respondents reported were work-life balance (31%), military culture (26%), and personal well-being (24%). Many military spouses reported issues with loneliness and isolation, while others indicated a lack of resources suitable for their needs. Partnering with postsecondary educational institutions and sharing studies on military spouses could contribute to a culture shift on campuses and online environments for improved student outcomes.

Trail et al. (2019) shared their data with the DoD and suggested encouraging, supporting, and investing in military spouse education. A culture shift on post could include the following:

- Encouraging education providers to maximize the number of classes offered on military bases and ease the administrative difficulty of transferring courses
- Pursuing in-state tuition rates for military spouses
- Creating online or distance-learning opportunities
Even with full support for military spouse education as part of the DoD’s inclusion, diversity, and equality mission, there is a need for partnerships with institutional leaders in postsecondary education to provide access and resources for this student population on campus.

**Research Gap for Military Spouses**

Research on military soldiers and veterans has primarily focused on family and mental health topics, including posttraumatic stress disorder, violence, coping methods, and family stressors. Harrell et al. (2004) examined military veterans’ access to college education and vocational trades in the military. Military OneSource is a military-friendly outlet that provides veterans with various resources, from retirement and insurance to military career counseling. However, there has been limited research on military dependents, and the extant research has focused on dependent children’s ability to adapt to onset deployment, family stressors, and ambiguous loss (Mancini, 2019).

Military spouses remain overwhelmingly overlooked in any research discipline. Military OneSource and other military journals have focused on this population as the helpmate for military children to adapt to ever-changing lives or to present resources for military spouses to assist in PCS moves and family readiness group events (Harrell et al., 2004; MilOneSource, National Military Family Association, 2007). Some researchers have acknowledged military spouses’ underrepresentation in the workforce and attempted to find the reason for the economic divide (Harrell et al., 2004; MilOneSource, National Military Family Association, 2007; Ott et al., 2019). However, there is a research gap on military spouses’ access to education, especially in light of the disproportionate number of unemployed and underemployed military spouses in the workforce. This study filled the need for additional research on military spouses’ higher education access. Particularly, research on military spouses as online learners and adult learners
could provide an understanding of military spouse culture and contribute to initiatives to support their higher education access (Gonzalez, 2021).

**Theories for Research**

This research focused on military spouses’ stories of their challenges with higher education access. Military spouses remain vastly underrepresented and misunderstood in research and society. The ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2002) and Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2004) provided the theoretical foundation for this research.

**Boss’s Theory of Ambiguous Loss**

Boss (2006) based ambiguous loss theory in the family sciences and Hill’s (1966) mentorship and research on family stressors, dynamics, and outcomes. All families face difficulties and challenges; however, some overcome challenges easily and address problems head-on, while others experience devastation (Vaux & Asay, 2019). Family stressors include marriage, childbirth, retirement, and unexpected events, such as accidents, illnesses, and divorces. Boss (2002) described family stressors as “pressure or tension in the family system—a disturbance in the steady state of the family” (p. 16). Stress can disrupt everyday family life; a crisis is different because it causes the family to stop or change daily events (Vaux & Asay, 2019). Caplan (1964), a pioneer in crisis intervention, described a crisis as “an obstacle that is, for a time, insurmountable by the use of customary methods of problem solving” (p. 18). The loss and family stressors theories versus family crisis were the foundation of the ambiguous loss theory.

Since the introduction of the crisis theory, some scholars have interpreted the perception element toward problem-solving (Vaux & Asay, 2019). Individuals attain coping skills with confidence and leadership to face adversity (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986). For example, children
of divorce who have confidence that things typically work out might feel less upset by the divorce and have healthy and long-lasting marriages. Perceptions can affect how individuals believe they can overcome everyday setbacks, trauma, or unbearable sorrow (Seligman, 1991).

Resilience is the ability to face adversity and exhibit positive coping behaviors (Coleman & Ganong, 2002). Resilience is a learned skill developed and situationally adapted over time (Seligman, 1991). Boss (2002) used the theories of resilience and coping with a loss with no end or closure to develop the ambiguous loss theory. Mancini et al. (2020) used the ambiguous loss theory to research military personnel lost in combat and military children’s coping mechanisms and resilience. Researchers could expand on Mancini’s work to help postsecondary educational leaders foster student success for military spouses.

Boss’s Theory of Ambiguous Loss in Extant Research

Scholars have used the ambiguous loss theory in research on women’s health and therapy, including analyzing the emotional trauma among mothers related to miscarriage (McGee, 2014) and perceptions of social support systems for families with children with severe autism (Lee, 2013). Psychology scholars have also used the theory to study families dealing with stress and anxiety, particularly the phenomena of “goodbye with leaving” and “leaving without goodbye” that occurs when children grow up with absent fathers (Boss, 2007, p. 26). Scholars used the ambiguous loss theory in the 1970s to understand the family unit after the Vietnam War, when many soldiers were physically missing, and after the 9/11 attacks in the United States (W. W. Norton, 2021). Recent use of the ambiguous loss theory has focused on Alzheimer’s disease and the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on loss, stress, and turmoil. Despite limited use outside of physiology and medical research, the theory has been applied to the military population, including soldiers and dependents (Mancini et al., 2020). Researchers have yet to apply the
theory to military spouses as a student population, as there has been a lack of research on this student population. Several scholars have used the ambiguous loss theory to explore mentorship and family stressors, dynamics, and outcomes (Boss, 2002; Caplan, 1964; Hill, 1966; Vaux & Asay, 2019). Boss (2007) suggested that the overarching critique would be that of any qualitative study regarding the understanding of people rather than quantitative approach to data collection.

**Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self Authorship**

Baxter Magolda (2009) transformed learning principles from cognitive and psychosocial development to a holistic approach with multiple domains of learning (Abes & Hernández, 2016) based on the self-authorship theory. Researchers have expanded Baxter Magolda’s theory to include various and diverse student populations (Abes & Jones, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). The learning partnership model and the self-authorship theory have had a lasting impact on the discipline (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004).

Recently, researchers have explored the limitations of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Particularly, critics have expressed concern that the theory focuses on the individual rather than the individual’s socioeconomic constructs (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Pizzolato, 2003). According to Abes and Hernández (2016), context has been a longstanding pillar of the discipline; therefore, additional investigations should address oppressive systems, such as racism, classism, and heterosexism, and interact with development toward self-authorship (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Scholars have extensively researched and expanded on Baxter Magolda’s theory to include contextual situations, such as racism and poverty as limitations to self-authorship (Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Pizzoloato, 2003). Despite criticisms, Baxter Magolda’s (2000, 2004) self-authorship theory was appropriate for studying military spouses’ higher education access. There is limited research on military spouses.
Therefore, additional research on the self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2009) should include contextual constructs of oppression, racism, classicism, and socioeconomic class and the intersectionality that contribute to self-authorship stressors (Abes & Hernández, 2016).

**Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self Authorship in Extant Research**

Numerous educational scholars have used Baxter Magolda’s learning model principle of self-authorship. Education literature has indicated that the self-authorship model is a way to challenge students to fulfill outcomes, reinforce student confidence, and encourage educators to create cultures of care within the learning environment (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Although scholars have applied the self-authorship model to diverse student populations (Abes & Jones, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007), they have not yet applied it to military spouses accessing higher education. Self-authorship principles could enable those in underserved communities to incorporate learning experiences based on lived and learned experiences. Critics suggest Baxter Magolda’s model does not provide students of color with the same equitable outcomes as students from privileged backgrounds; instead, Ashlee et al. (2018) cited critical race theory as the most appropriate framework for analyzing student success outcomes.

**Belonging Literature**

Postsecondary educational institutions, such as community colleges are a 20th-century phenomenon, dating back to 1901 with Joliet Junior College. Community colleges addressed various purposes in their early years, from teacher training and 4-year university transfer to homemaking courses (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). In 1948, the U.S. President’s Commission on Higher Education focused on the mission to become community colleges by providing job and technical training and contributing to higher education expansion based on the GI Bill.
Community colleges’ missions and visions vary by institution; however, they have a common goal to ensure higher education access (Bragg, 2001; Cohen et al., 2014).

Community colleges provide diverse student groups (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). The Community College Research Center (2019) indicated that in Fall 2017, 44% of community college students were Latinx, 35% were Black, and 31% were White. Additionally, 55% of those attending community colleges were low-income students.

Expanding the mission and expectations of postsecondary educational institutions also resulted in inequalities in completion rates and learning outcomes. Postsecondary educational leaders have long discussed and analyzed how to improve equitable learning outcomes for diverse student populations with frameworks, such as guided pathways and strong start-to-finish programs, to improve student engagement (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Institutions of postsecondary education have also adopted unique strategies to influence the student experience with psychosocial interventions for belonging, resilience, and motivation (Edgecombe & Bickerstaff, 2018; Martinez & Munsch, 2019).

**Belonging Interventions Literature in Extant Research**

Originating as junior colleges at the turn of the 21st century, community colleges as learning environments have undergone continuous change. The community college network has had rapidly shifting goals to become hubs for academic opportunities for all students. The literature on postsecondary education student experience includes various topics (Martinez & Munsch, 2019), including physiological interventions, such as belonging, with recent consideration of the pre- and post-COVID-19 movements of engaging students in online forums and preparing them to return to campus (Bragg, 2001; Martinez & Hernández, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Many interventions, such as Green Zone training on military-affiliated students for
campus faculty and staff, now address underserved and protected student populations based on sexual orientation and identity with Safe Zone training and policies (Martinez & Munsch, 2019). The extent that postsecondary educational leaders prioritize students feeling welcomed indicates their commitment to equitable student outcomes. By focusing on community colleges strategies and literature to enhance belonging on campus as an example of postsecondary education provides a framework to continue this work at all levels of higher education.

Chapter 2 Summary

With a framework of the ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2002) and the self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2000, 2004), this research provided a better understanding of military spouses’ unique challenges as a student population. A better understanding of this population could enable postsecondary educational leaders, staff, and educators to provide increased opportunities for student success based on equity and access to positively affect completion and transfers. Including psychosocial interventions, such as belonging, could enable postsecondary educational leaders to foster supportive learning environments for the active-duty military spouse population (Edgecombe & Bickerstaff, 2018; Martinez & Munsch, 2019).

Future researchers could expand on this study by incorporating in more detail the contextual constructs of oppression, racism, classicism, ageism, socioeconomic status, and the intersectionality that cause disparities within the military spouse student population. Scholars should also evaluate the different needs among subpopulations within the military spouse community. Understanding military culture could enable higher education leaders to create support systems and prepare faculty to support online learning environments for military spouses (Chadwick, 2018; Gonzalez, 2021; Lewis, 2020).
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the study’s methodology and research design. The qualitative study involved ethnographic storytelling of military spouses’ success in accessing higher education. The sample of 10 participants represented the military spouse population across the United States.

Convenience sampling provided 10 eligible participants; however, one withdrew due to a child’s illness. The data collection occurred with semi structured interviews via Zoom, with Otter.ai subsequently used for transcription. Afterward, the data were themed and coded. Ethical considerations included obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before the interview process. The study presented minimal and reasonable risks to the participants regarding the anticipated benefit of understanding the unique military spouse student population.

Research Design

This research was a qualitative ethnographic study involving military spouses’ stories of higher education access. The participants described their successes while obtaining higher education. Zoom was the tool used to digitally record the stories of participating military spouses from across the United States. The interviews occurred over no more than three 1-hour Zoom sessions, with 15-minute follow-up Zoom sessions as needed. All interviews were virtual due to COVID-19 and the transience of the military spouse population.

Understanding the complexity of ethnography requires understanding the differences between ethnography and autoethnography. Autoethnography is a process and product in which the researcher analyzes personal experiences to shape society’s understanding of a culture (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach requires the researcher to have a similar background and experience
as the subjects. Ethnographic scholars focus on the subject community’s relational practices, often presenting the cultural members’ shared experiences to cultural outsiders to provide an understanding on a fundamental level (Maso, 2001). This ethnographic study focused on military spouses (the cultural insiders) and their successes in attaining higher education to suggest a culture change within postsecondary educational institutions (the cultural outsiders) that provide services.

Geertz (1973) and Goodall (2001) stated that ethnographers become participant observers in the culture—in this case, I am a military spouse accessing higher education. I did not rely on field notes but coded Zoom transcripts as part of this ethnographic study. An autoethnography is qualitative and often the only research on a specific topic, much like this dissertation. According to Allen (personal interview, May 4, 2006), an autoethnographic researcher must:

- Look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you’re] telling [your] story—and that’s nice—but people do that on Oprah [a U.S.-based television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else’s? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and research literature to use. That’s your advantage. If you can’t frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as ‘my story,’ then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else’s I see 25 times a day on TV?

There was a need to clarify between these three methods to present this study’s design. As an active-duty military spouse accessing higher education, I was an active participant in the interview process due to my unique background and relationship with the cultural members. I also approached this research as a cultural outsider due to my position and work at North Carolina Postsecondary educational institutions to equip postsecondary educational leaders to
foster equitable higher education outcomes for military spouses. This dissertation did not incorporate my current experiences but was an ethnographic study of military spouses’ success in accessing higher education.

Denzin and Lincoln (2017) provided a guide to understanding qualitative research. I asked the participants open-ended questions and recorded the one-on-one interviews. I have experience with and heavy immersion in military spouse culture. Autoethnography was not this study’s intent, but it was a factor. My access to education as a military spouse inspired me to become a voice for cultural change at the institutional level. This research was about military spouses’ access to education. Although I did not want to marginalize the study as an autoethnography, the participants’ stories often mirrored my own (Ellis, 2011; Spindler & Spindler, 1987).

Ethnography in Education

Although rooted in anthropology, many scholars now conduct ethnographic research on health, industry, deviance, social and political movements, and education (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Since the mid-1900s, ethnographic research has increased in popularity due to its alternative approach, making it the dominant method for studying social life (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Burgess (1984) stated that ethnography adapted “from coral garden to city street” (p. 35). Scholars have used ethnography’s adaptability and usefulness for grasping and understanding cultures and relationships between cultural members to research education, online learning communities, and the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on students. Scholars of online teaching and learning procedures, education evaluations, and the pivot to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic have followed the ethnographic design.
Strengths of Ethnographic Research

Ethnography originated in anthropology as a study of relationships between members of a particular culture (Giese & Kauffman, 1998). The ethnographic design was suitable for studying the relationships between active-duty military spouses and higher education access and understanding military spouses’ unique successes and challenges due to their unique and transient culture. In anthropology, ethnographic researchers use data collection practices such as participant observation, interviews, and secondary data (Forbes, 2021); this research used the same sources. Virtual recorded interviews with the participants provided the opportunity to conduct participant observations, take field notes, and digitally transcribe the interviews for data analysis.

The key element of ethnographic research is creating meaning from patterns (Singer, 2009). In this study, analyzing the participants’ tone, word choice and use, and mannerisms; taking field notes; and transcribing the interviews were the approaches used for determining emergent patterns. According to Shaw (2012), a successful ethnographer uses immersive data collection techniques to examine a culture from within rather than the outside looking in. At the time of this study, I was a researcher, a student accessing higher education, and a former active-duty Army spouse. Reflexivity and positionality were necessary to ensure my study remained ethnographic and not autoethnographic due to my close connection to the active-duty Army spouse community.

Critiques of Ethnographic Research

Critics of ethnographic research question the design’s legitimacy, stating it is subject to the researcher and often has positivist results (Pole & Morrison, 2003). However, the critics tend to conduct quantitative research and do not see the value of qualitative methods. In planning their
studies, researchers must assess designs for their characteristics, successes, limitations, and challenges (i.e., for what they are and are not).

Although a supporter of ethnographic research, Fetterman (2019) critiqued the design when analyzing the studies’ results. Fetterman stated that traditional ethnographers attempt to “be holistic” but fall “short of the whole” (p. 21). When the researcher’s objective is to analyze and draw conclusions about a cultural population, norms and patterns emerge; however, they might not represent the whole population. Fetterman’s notion was essential to this study of active-duty military spouses accessing higher education. As much as cultural norms, attitudes, and barriers impact military spouses’ higher education access, so do the successes. The outliers among ethnographic research participants can illuminate the study as much as those following the community’s majority patterns.

Participants

This study’s participants were active-duty military spouses in the United States. According to the DoD, there are 641,639 active-duty military spouses. Convenience sampling, a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling (Etikan et al., 2016), was appropriate to recruit a small sample of active-duty officer and enlisted member spouses. The sample met specific criteria regarding their education and marital status with active-duty soldiers. The participants were an easily accessible population due to their geographical proximity and accessibility to the researcher (see Etikan et al., 2016; Given, 2008). Although I initially recruited from areas near my location of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I extended the study to include military spouses across the United States. The recruited sample for this study was 10 military spouses, but one participant withdrew; therefore, nine active-duty military spouses participated.
**Instrumentation**

This study occurred with a semi structured interview protocol (see Appendices A and B). I wrote the questions to get in-depth responses to answer the research question: What are the stories around factors in learning of Army active-duty military spouses achieving academic success in higher education?

**Interviews**

One-on-one interviews with the military spouses occurred via Zoom. The interview questions focused on military spouses’ culture, challenges, and successes in accessing higher education, and overall thoughts on the military spouse culture and lifestyle. The interview questions on military spouse culture addressed the following topics:

- Number of permanent duty station assignments
- Number of states and overseas duty station assignments.
- Geographical location from military spouse’s support system
- Support services found and utilized on post to assist military spouses with higher education
- Additional factors impacting this population’s higher education success

The questions were means of exploring military spouses’ challenges with accessing education and transfer credits. The participants’ spouses’ number of deployments showed that culture is imperative to understanding military spouses’ challenges. Participants’ responses showed how institution leaders could partner with military service organizations for outreach and providing student support services to military spouses as potential students. The interview questions addressed the participants’ education levels and their challenges and successes while attending higher education. For example:
- What level of education did you obtain before marriage?
- Did you transfer credits from state to state?
- What were the most difficult aspects of accessing higher education, given the military culture?
- What support did you receive from the institutions you enrolled in that positively impacted your performance?
- If you did not obtain a degree, what were the reasons for incompletion or lack of enrollment?
- Which of your experiences could indicate how to better shape institutional and cultural change for postsecondary education?

**Data Collection**

Nine participants described their culture and successes while obtaining higher education in three 1-hour sessions via Zoom. Data collection occurred in the following order:

1. Obtained IRB approval.
2. Participant recruitment with convenience sampling via email on September 1, 2021. The invitation email contained a Qualtrics demographic survey, and the potential participants had 2 weeks to indicate their interest in participating.
3. Interviews scheduled and conducted over 1 week via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the participants’ transience. The interviews were no more than three 1-hour sessions held via Zoom from September 7–14, 2021.

This study occurred in line with Johnson’s (2002) and Ellis’s (2001) strategies to ensure each participant felt calm and safe before and during their interviews. I played calming music in the
background when the participants joined the virtual Zoom interviews. I introduced myself to them and explained the interview scope and that they could withdraw at any time. The prescreening handout included the study’s information so all participants knew they could participate voluntarily and withdraw at any time.

I used virtual interview techniques to mimic the traditional interview environment as much as possible. I also considered time zone differences and technological difficulties by ensuring the participants could access Zoom on their devices before their interviews. The interviews occurred virtually due to the participants’ transient lifestyles and the COVID-19 pandemic’s challenges and barriers.

Virtual interviews provide the opportunity to gain a more diverse population due to easy interview access (Han et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2020) and the elimination of barriers, such as travel and time management challenges, that could affect the participants’ willingness to engage in the interviews (Han et al., 2022). I used virtual interview strategies to “be friendly, open, and genuinely interested” (Patel et al., 2020, p. 1456) while listening to each participant’s story. Patel et al. (2020) stated that researchers conducting virtual interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic should remain “diligent [in] making an effort to relax the applicant and remain engaging despite interruptions in video feeds and incongruities between video and audio feeds” (p. 1457). I used the traditional ethnographic framework by Ellis (2001) and Fetterman (2019), adapting the traditional interview processes due to the pandemic’s unique challenges and opportunities. The virtual interview techniques and strategies provided all participants equitable opportunities to participate and influence the research while engaging virtually and reducing COVID-19 risk and exposure.
Field Notes

Qualitative scholars have used field notes, or scratch notes, since the early 1900s (Emerson et al., 2011; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Several notable anthropologists developed the informal approach of “jotting” to record personal thoughts and feelings as another data layer (Ottenberg, 1990). The qualitative methodology suggests that researchers take field notes to enhance data collection and provide a rich context for analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lofland et al., 2005; Mulhall, 2003; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative researchers can use impactful note-taking strategies and techniques while conducting their studies. Field notes are means to document the physical environment, participant interactions, and the language used during the interviews to provide context (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Emerson et al., 2011; Mulhall, 2003; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993; Sandelowski, 1994; Tsai et al., 2016). Field notes can include the physical environment’s sights, smells, and sounds and the researcher’s impressions during the participant interviews. In documenting field notes, researchers can also include an outline for precoding and study design while providing essential context for the data analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Emerson et al., 2011; Mulhall, 2003; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993; Sandelowski, 1994; Tsai et al., 2016; see Figure 3.1).
Figure 3.1

Field Notes for Precoding

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*Note. From Analyzing & Interpreting Ethnographic Data (Vol. 5), by M. C. LeCompte and J. J. Schensul. Rowman Altamira.*

Figure 3.1 presents the field note techniques useful for precoding strategies (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Field note techniques include an observing category. The researcher can take notes on the interview environment and the participants’ interactions and language to facilitate understanding and precoding. The researcher should also document sights, sounds, and smells to grasp the environment during interviews for ethnographic research. Scholars should engage in reflection and ideological bias reflexivity before interviewing and note-taking. Ultimately, scholars use field notes to gain data and better understand the participants while maintaining trustworthiness (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). During this study’s semi structured interview
process, I took field notes using deductive and inductive practices. I applied several techniques while interacting with and interviewing the participants. First, I took notes with language-focused data and established preliminary coding when I noticed patterns (see Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Emerson et al., 2011; Mulhall, 2003; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993; Sandelowski, 1994; Tsai et al., 2016). I tracked the questions asked and recorded the time when I noted speech phrases or peaks so I could review the interview transcripts for additional information. I also combined themes in my field journal and recorded and organized them in a Google Slides spreadsheet.

Arithmetic patterns and structures enable ethnographers to assemble items into codes with a top-down or bottom-up approach (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Precoding of the qualifying questions occurred with a top-down approach by organizing the participants’ years of marriage, number of Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moves, number of deployments, education level, and other socioeconomic factors. After the interviews, bottom-up coding was the means used to determine themes and triangulate patterns (see Figure 3.2).
Figure 3.2 presents top-down data gathering and organizing techniques for the descriptive demographics for age, race, gender, education level, years of marriage, profession, and the number of children. The top-down data organization was useful in the prescreening welcome letter (see Appendix A). Figure 3.3 presents the bottom-up data collection during triangulation and analysis of commonalities and differences among the participants’ experiences. For example, the Family Readiness Group (FRG) is a support service for active-duty military spouses, accessing higher education was tracked, and perceptions were gathered from the participants with various experiences and roles in their respective FRGs.
Figure 3.3 presents bottom-up data collection techniques (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). This technique was a useful means of analyzing the data on the participants’ shared experiences.

**Trust Building**

Semi structured participant interviews occurred via Zoom to understand the overarching research question: What are the stories around factors in learning of Army active-duty military. I played calming music in the background when the participants joined the virtual Zoom session,
introduced myself, and explained the interview scope and the method for withdrawing. I maintained a calm and friendly demeanor throughout the session. The participants indicated their understanding and readiness to begin before the recording began. After beginning the recording, I told the participants I would first ask them about themselves, so they could feel comfortable and ease into the interviews (see Ellis et al., 2011; Johnson, 2002). The few moments of establishing rapport with each participant enabled them to open up regarding sensitive topics such as educational barriers, deployment stressors, and their lives as active-duty military spouses.

**Triangulation**

After establishing keyword, phrase, and experience clusters, I connected consistent or similar themes in the participant interviews (see LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Item-level and domain analysis occurred to identify and compare certain events through analytical induction. Lofland’s activity structure and Mishler’s theory enabled me to create webs of the linkages between the participants’ lived and learned experiences (see Figure 3.4).
Figure 3.4 presents the triangulation in the data collection process. The interview and field note analysis occurred with top-down and bottom-up data collection techniques that showed the similarities among the participants’ experiences of military spouse culture and higher education access.

Data Analysis

I used Ellis’s (2004) theoretical framework to establish the overarching research question and conduct ethnographic research. I collected data to establish themes and trends using ethnographic top-down and bottom-up practices (see LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). After establishing patterns and organizing and classifying individual participants’ data, I used the webbing technique to combine common phrases, ideas, and feedback and establish clusters and themes. Afterward, I analyzed and classified the data based on the research question and interview question categories. After watching all the interview videos, I uploaded the Zoom recordings to Otter.ai for transcription. The transcripts underwent a data reduction phase of
organizing the files into a Google spreadsheet for memoing and coding. Major themes emerged, and data saturation occurred.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study received IRB approval before the research commenced (see Appendix D). The IRB approval indicated that the study presented minimal and reasonable risks to the participants in relation to anticipated benefits. The participants conducted their virtual interviews in safe and comfortable locations. Convenience sampling occurred based on my access to the population, and participant selection was equitable and voluntary. I recorded the interviews and will present them as a multimedia presentation; therefore, the participants’ identities did not remain private or confidential. The military spouses did not receive compensation for their participation. The informed consent process occurred per the federal regulatory and U-M requirements required by the IRB.

Each participant voluntarily consented to engage in a digitally recorded interview that I will use for future research. I will present the research in the North Carolina Community College System and other postsecondary educational systems. The participants will not remain confidential or anonymous or receive financial royalties.

**Chapter Summary**

This study’s purpose was to analyze military spouse culture and military spouses’ educational journeys as they access higher education and retraining opportunities. This qualitative study could positively impact equitable student success outcomes. Postsecondary educational leaders could use this study’s findings to enact cultural and institutional changes to better serve and understand the military spouse student population.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the study’s methodology, sample selection, participant recruitment, and findings. This qualitative ethnographic research focused on military spouses’ higher education access. Military spouses are a transient population due to multiple relocations, separation from support systems, and spousal deployments; therefore, their challenges can negatively impact their employment and degree-seeking endeavors in traditional learning environments (Lewis, 2020). Although the study initially included 10 military spouses, one participant withdrew due to a child’s illness. Virtual interviews occurred in no more than three 1-hour sessions, with 15-minute follow-up interviews as needed. The participants discussed their higher education access and how the military culture impacted their students’ success goals.

Methodology

This study included an appropriate population and sample size for ethnographic research on active-duty military spouses’ higher education access. One of the 10 individuals recruited had to withdraw, leaving a sample of nine active-duty military spouses from across the United States. The purposefully chosen sample was culturally and socioeconomically representative of the unique and transient military culture.

Sample

The participant recruitment occurred via an email sent to FRG leaders and military spouses affiliated with the Army FRG. The email included a welcome letter with a Qualtrics demographic survey, which interested individuals could use to submit their personal information, email addresses, and preliminary information. Qualtrics survey access began on September 1, 2021; by September 2, 2021, 10 active-duty military spouses who met the inclusion criteria had completed it. Subsequently, I closed the Qualtrics survey and scheduled the Zoom interviews.
with the participants. The participant interviews occurred between September 7, 2021, and September 14, 2021, with each lasting no longer than 1 hour. I uploaded the recorded Zoom interviews into Otter.ai for transcriptions. After removing filler words from the transcripts (e.g., “um”), I organized each transcript into a Google spreadsheet with a tab for each participant. The data reduction process entailed consolidating data from chunks into clusters and coding. Afterward, the data analysis consisted of interpreting and theming the outcomes. Three major themes emerged from the study: barriers, desires, and supporting roles. Each theme included several codes that provided insight into military spouse culture and education access. Saturation occurred, as many of the same values and themes emerged from the interviews.

**Participant Descriptions**

The nine participants represented different socioeconomic classes within the U.S. Army community. Of the nine, three were enlisted service member spouses, and six were officer spouses. The participants ranged from 28 to 44 years and had been married for 6 to 17 years at the time of the interviews. One military spouse had one child, and the remaining eight participants had two children each. The participants signed a consent form to display their names, photos, videos, and likenesses; therefore, the study did not require pseudonyms. Each participant knew the study would not remain confidential or anonymous, as indicated in the welcome letter (see Appendix A).
Connie, the first military spouse interviewed in this study, came from Fort Riley, Kansas. She had acquired her PhD in Expressive Fine Arts at age 44 and was a dance instructor at Georgetown before her marriage. Connie has been married for 7 years and had two children, ages 6 and 4. Connie and her family had relocated four times in 7 years and expected another relocation only 8 months after their last move. She was unemployed at the time of the study, but had sought retraining and reskilling opportunities for health and wellness consulting through postsecondary educational institutions, given the difficulties she faced of finding employment using her PhD due to frequent relocations. Connie stated,

My husband, when he joined the military, we lived apart because I had my own career and decided that it was not really beneficial for me to move with him when I knew that he was going to be deployed multiple times.

Connie and her husband thoroughly discussed moving in together, weighing the pros and cons of her established career. Connie stated that deployment and relocation challenges caused her to question joining her husband early in their marriage,

Right when we got married, he did a long deployment. [There are] long deployments for the military right now. It’s anywhere between 6 months to 1 year. He did a 9-month
deployment right after we got married, and I did not want to move [because of] all the jobs I loved. I didn’t want to move and start over and be alone during a deployment. We lived separately until we decided we wanted to have a family. We have had multiple deployments since then.

Connie's family had Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moved three times in 7 years, including a cross-country relocation after her youngest son’s birth. She stated,

[Before] being a military spouse, I had my own career. As soon as I joined him, when we started having a family, all the things I had created for myself in terms of community and education and the career that I had [were] completely erased [due to] needing to move with him. Since then, there [have] been many different avenues of identity issues [and] trying to find jobs. I’m having to do other jobs for my spouse within the military to support the organization. That’s just kind of where I am now—I’m in a supportive role.

**Figure 4.2**

*Emily*

Emily lived in Fort Stewart, Georgia, with her military family. Emily has been an officer’s wife for 12 years and had two children, ages 7 and 3.5. Emily and her husband plan on him making the military a career so he can attain retirement. Emily earned her degree in photography before marriage and was unemployed during the study. However, she stated the
reasons for unemployment were issues of relicensing her business license to a new state upon her latest PCS move. She also noted the hardships of maintaining her business given frequent relocations making her mainly referral-based business suffer financially. She stated,

[My husband’s] been active duty the whole time. He was enlisted when we met, and I was going to college. Then he finished his enlistment about a year and a half after we got married. He went back to college to get commissioned as an officer. He’s been an officer for about 10 years. We have two kids. My daughter, Natalie, is almost 7, and my son, Elias, is 3.5 [years]. We have PCS. We’ve moved in those 12 years, I think, eight or nine times. My daughter has lived in four different places in 7 years, and my son has lived in three different places in 3.5 years. My husband is sort of in it for the long haul, [but] it depends on what his career options are when he hits his 20 years for retirement.

Figure 4.3

Kaylene

Kaylene was an active-duty military spouse stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. She had been married for over 10 years and had two children, ages 18 and 16. She and her family had relocated six times in 10 years. Kaylene began her education years into her marriage and recently
graduated with a degree in health science and a certificate in personal training from an online institution. Kaylene planned on starting a new position in the coming weeks. She stated,

   It definitely can be a challenge. It’s hard because you have to completely restart everything every time you PCS. [We have to get a] new doctor’s office, new dentist, office, new hairstylist, new schools, [and we’re] enrolling the kids in and out of schools. And then, of course, just going through the whole move itself is a lot of work, trying to find a place to live in [and] the best place to be and all of that. We’ve had many moves.”

Figure 4.4

Danielle

Danielle was an active-duty military spouse stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Danielle was 28 and had two children, ages 6 and 4. Danielle was married for 10 years to an enlisted service member and was also the daughter of an enlisted active-duty military member. She considered returning to school or renewing the cosmetology license she acquired in Hawaii, but the cost of retraining and relicensing created barriers. At the time of the interview, she was unemployed, but seeking opportunities to retrain and enroll in a program for medical phlebotomy at the local community college and raising her children. She discussed the challenges she was facing based on the availability of classes, childcare concerns, and residency requirements for
tuition assistance as being barriers to her access for tuition assistance as being barriers to her access Danielle stated,

   My dad’s been in [the Army] my whole life. He also retired. My brother has gone into a career [in] the military. I’ve been around [the military] ever since I remember, and I ended up marrying into it as well. So, since I was 16—I got married at 18—he went to the military. I’ve been married now for 10 years. I’ve moved around, from Kansas to Florida to Hawaii to Georgia to North Carolina. So, a lot of moving. We had two kids in the process. It’s just been a lot—a lot of moving [and] a lot of packing, and I look forward to the day I don’t have to pack anymore.

Figure 4.5

Audie

Audie was an active-duty military spouse of 6 years. Her husband was enlisted when they married but went to an elite school to become a warrant officer. She and her husband lived in a geographical bachelor situation, with her husband stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, while she lived in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, with their two children, ages 6 and 3. Audie sought
her bachelor’s degree in Divinity from an online university. Audie was unemployed during the interview. Audie said she and her children were “about 4 hours away from him, but we went ahead and purchased our retirement home and are just planning for our future.” Audie and her military family had relocated or PCSed three times in 6 years. She stated,

I think of it as a new adventure. I don’t think we’ve ever been anywhere that wasn’t absolutely amazing. Our last duty station was Oklahoma. I loved Oklahoma [because] there was so much to do outdoors. Don’t get me wrong, moving can be stressful when you have children, but you can make the best of it.

Like the other participants, Audie discussed the frustration of PCS moving. She explained the struggles of packing, relocating, and dealing with living conditions while PCSing.

I think we drove 22 hours straight with our kids and everything that we could pack in the back of my truck. We were like, ‘We’re just gonna do it.’ We didn’t get our things for a month. We had to live in this really crappy apartment because our housing on post ended up getting canceled [because] the family didn’t move out, and we [had] nowhere to go.

We were in Oklahoma with our things, a hotel, and then an apartment. It was crazy.

Despite the setbacks of relocating with children, Audie stated, “I think we’re really blessed that we get to experience so many different places that most people probably [won’t] get to in their lifetime. It’s just incredible.”
Hayden was an active-duty officer’s wife in Destin, Florida, who had been married for 10 years and had three children, ages 6, 4, and 2. Hayden earned her Juris Doctorate from Louisiana State before her marriage. She stated, “I’m a multitasking mother with a Juris Doctorate, and I work full time.” Hayden described the military spouse culture and her struggles finding employment due to frequent relocations. She states

A military spouse is someone whose husband takes the front seat in their life. You have to really kind of be flexible [and] follow them around [because] their job really comes first. It’s a lot of sacrifice but also a lot of benefits, and I’m extremely proud of my husband for everything he’s done because he has sacrificed a lot.
Ashely was an active-duty officer’s wife at Fort Benning, Georgia. She had been married for 7 years and recently had her first child. Ashley received her nursing degree before marriage. She and her family had relocated twice in 7 years. Ashley stated,

I am a new mother, nurse, and military spouse. We just recently bought our house. I think what goes into being a military spouse is patience and understanding, as well as love for your spouse and their career while they’re in [the military]. [You] just [love] your family as best as you can while trying to maintain your goals and aspirations as well.

Ashley enrolled in an online photography course at a nearby postsecondary educational institution. She stated it fit better with the demands of her lifestyle and allowed her an opportunity for self-employment, while being full-time caregiver to her daughter:

[My husband] has been deployed once with your husband, Maggie, Captain May, to Iraq, for 9 months, and we were newly married then. I was used to kind of being on my own. But now that we have a baby, my heart goes out to those spouses who have had to go
through those 9-month or longer deployments and pick up all those responsibilities. I honestly can’t imagine what that’s going to be like or what that is like.

**Figure 4.8**

*Jessica*

Jessica was an active-duty officer wife of 10 years with two children who lived in Fort Stewart, Georgia. Jessica received her dental hygienist degree from a college in Boston, Massachusetts, before marriage. She said her life as an Army wife and relocation provides additional challenges to finding employment. She has utilized online professional development resources through companies that are hosted by postsecondary educational institutions as a means of retraining under different state’s requirements to transfer her license credentials. Jessica stated,

I have been a military spouse for almost 10 years now. [I’ve been]12 [years] with my husband. We started dating and did long distance for a couple of years. I am from Maine, originally, [and] he’s from New Hampshire. We actually met when we were younger. Our families camped at the same campground, [and] we knew each other over the summers. We reconnected through Facebook over time, started dating long distance, and then he got stationed in Alaska.
I was living [and] working in Boston as a dental hygienist. He got stationed in Alaska, and we were kind of like, ‘Alright, well, we’re gonna do this. If we are [going to be together], Alaska is a little too far away.’ So, we ended up getting married. [I] Moved to Alaska with him. Ten years later, we’re still doing it.

**Figure 4.9**

*Vanessa*

Vanessa was an enlisted active-duty military spouse in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. She had been married for 17 years and had two children. She was unemployed during the interview but expressed the desire to return to postsecondary educational institutions. Vanessa has a desire to become a child psychologist and has looked at opportunities to enroll in class to begin her associate degree. However, she states the nature of her lifestyle creates little room for her own goals. She is a full-time mother, and very involved in supporting her husband’s career. Vanessa and her military family have PCS moved four times. She stated,

> It’s been back and forth to the same key places, so we kind of lucked out with that. At the same time, it’s different every time we come back and forth. It’s harder on my son, my oldest son, [than] on the rest of the family.
Vanessa said her life as a military spouse required patience and flexibility. She stated,

Patience, that’s the Number 1 thing. You just have to go with the flow, basically,
[because] every day is different. You just have to do it and kind of hold it together.

Hopefully, at the end of the day, it’s worth it. In my opinion, it is worth it.

Criterion for Selection

The participant recruitment occurred with convenience sampling due to my Army FRG position. The 10 participants who completed the Qualtrics interest survey scheduled interviews. The initial demographic screening ensured a sample of active-duty military spouses diverse in socioeconomic class and spouse rank. Six participants were officer wives with ranks ranging from Captain to Major, and three were enlisted member spouses: One participant’s spouse was a warrant officer, one was a First Sergeant, and one was a sergeant. The sample provided the opportunity to analyze the participants’ different education levels for each category of enlisted and officer spouses.

Presentation of Findings

Theme 1: Barriers

The first major theme, barriers, included several codes, including Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moves, Family Readiness Group (FRG) disconnection, and deployment. PCS moves required the participants to relocate at the Army’s discretion. The participants’ families had made between two and seven PCS moves.

Barriers: Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) Moves. PCS moves are often a disruption to the military family unit. Unlike training schools, which can last weeks or months, PCS moves require soldiers to live at duty locations for more than 9 months (DoD, 2019). The PCS move is a permanent change of station due to U.S. Army-issued military orders requiring
the soldier, and often the immediate family, to move to a new post. These posts can be within the
state, in different states, across the country, or in different countries.

Jessica said,

The Army would actually move stuff, and then we moved on. For Alaska, we had to ship
one vehicle [because] the Army would only ship one vehicle. It took household goods,
gosh, like 2 weeks, 3 weeks, something like that to get to Alaska. We had to use a place
you can go and get couches and little TVs, TV stands, and stuff to use. Then, finally,
getting our stuff at the next location, half of the stuff [was] broken. Some stuff [was]
missing. It’s definitely stressful. Then, of course, adding kids into it and pets and
everything, it definitely is not anything I ever look forward to.

Connie also expressed frustration with PCS moves across the country with children and pets. She
described the moves as challenging mentally, physically, and emotionally. She stated,

We’ve done five PCS moves. It’s very stressful having the Army move you and having to
your things. When we moved from Fort Bragg, NC, to Fort Lewis, WA, we were without
our things for almost 8 weeks. We also moved with two kids and two dogs, which always
adds to the stress.

Danielle shared her experiences with PCS moves as a daughter, sister, and spouse. She
stated, “It’s a point of once you start getting on [track] and finally unpack, you have to move
right away. Right when you get to the end of unpacking, they’re like, ‘You’re moving again.’”

Connie said she knew she and her family would have to PCS 8 months after arriving at
Fort Riley, Kansas, from Fort Lewis, Washington, to Fort Benning, Georgia. Her family had
endured its fifth PCS move, with the sixth pending. She stated,
He’s done five PCS moves. I’ve done about the same just because he was at Fort Benning, and then he went up to New York. That was one PCS that I didn’t do. But then I also moved from the DC area to Fort Benning. It’s all these different things. But then, I guess, in total, if you were to equal everything else, we’ve done five PCS moves.

Kaylene described her experience of PCS moving six times in the last 10 years from various parts of the continental United States. She stated,

“It definitely can be a challenge. It’s hard because you have to completely restart everything every time you PCS. New doctor’s office, new dentist, [new] office, new hairstylist, [and] new schools, [and] enrolling the kids in and out of schools. Then, of course, just going through the whole move itself is a lot of work, trying to find a place to live in, the best place to be, and all of that. We’ve had so many moves.

Vanessa, the spouse of a senior-enlisted officer, described her PCS experiences of moving back and forth from two major locations across several state lines. She stated,

I have PCS [moved] with him four times, but it’s been back and forth to the same key places. We kind of lucked out with that. At the same time, it’s different every time we come back and forth. It’s harder on my son, my oldest son, [than] on the rest of the family. Figuring out what we do with our house that we own here is another issue, but it’s harder on our oldest son than on everyone else.

Emily, who married an officer, also emphasized the stress of PCS moves. However, she described the positive cultural experiences of meeting new people as a lived and learned experience of this unique lifestyle. She stated,

Moving every 2 to 3 years is not really nice. Not being able to plan my life can get a little stressful for me sometimes. But there [are] also a lot of benefits that I never thought I
would appreciate, like all the people that I’ve met, all the parts of the country that we’ve
gotten to see, and knowing that, literally, the whole world is open to us for the rest of his
career.

Jessica, who married an office, discussed the PCS move process by describing her latest
moves from Boston to Alaska and from Alaska to Georgia. She stated,

When I was living in Boston—it was after we were married—we were moving stuff from
his home, and I had to bring everything from Boston to his home of record. The Army
would actually move stuff, and then we moved on. For Alaska, we actually had to ship
one [vehicle]— the Army would only ship one vehicle. I ended up selling my car before I
left Boston to ship his truck.

When we got to Alaska, I bought a car because it was gonna cost way too much to
ship my old vehicle. [Our] household goods took, gosh, like 2 weeks, 3 weeks, something
like that, to get to Alaska. We had to use a place you can go and get couches and little
TVs, TV stands, and stuff to use. In the meantime, on post, I had to do that.

That was kind of the first time, but then moving from Alaska, it’s having
everything in order, [including] the tons and tons of paperwork. Then we had to go
through Canada. So, [we deal with] passport stuff, all of that, [and] having people come
and write everything down that you’re moving [and] not being able to pack anything
yourself, is a little stressful—you just stand there and watch them.

Then, finally getting your stuff at the next location, half the stuff is broken. Some
stuff [is] missing. One of the movers, I think, took my Instant Pot, which I was not happy
with, and then it’s just takes. We had certain things that were broken, but [we] didn’t
even want to go through the paperwork to get it replaced because that was even more
work. It’s just like, it is what it is. It’s definitely stressful. And then, of course, adding kids into it and pets and everything—it definitely is not anything I ever look forward to.

Ashley, who married an officer, was an outlier, having only PCS moved twice in nearly 10 years. She shared her experience with moving across state lines, stating,

We have PCS [moved] twice so far. Thankfully, Eric has wanted to stay where he can be closest to his family most of the time while he’s in [the military]. Otherwise, yeah, it’s a stressful process. I think the hardest part is finding friends because you pick up and move. The moving part isn’t so bad. I personally don’t think [it’s bad], and I like being able to see different parts of the country and experiencing that and meeting new people, but I think it definitely has its challenges in terms of the community aspect.

Danielle was a military dependent as a child, as her father served 25 years in the Army before retirement. She had been a military spouse for 10 years. She noted that relocations and constant PCS moves caused employment challenges. She stated,

It was never an easy thing where you could just go get a job and know you’re going to be here for a certain amount of time and then go back home and get another job. It’s stressful. I don’t think that anyone prepares for all the moving. I think moving is the main problem with everything. You’re never sitting still. You can’t build a foundation anywhere. It’s just you trying to figure out how to adapt to every situation.

Audie also shared her PCS experiences of moving with small children across the country. She stated,

I think we drove 22 hours straight with our kids and everything that we could pack in the back of my truck. We were like, “We’re just gonna do it.” We didn’t get our things for a month. We had to live in this really crappy apartment because our housing on post ended
up getting canceled [because] the family didn’t move out, and we [had] nowhere to go.

We were in Oklahoma with our things [in] a hotel and then an apartment. It was crazy.

The commonality and saturation regarding PCS showed that it was a significant barrier for military spouses. PCS caused social and professional anxiety due to continuously restarting. The PCS process was also a strain on domestic partnerships and the families and friends left behind. PCS is a barrier unique to the active-duty military spouse student population. However, PCS moves are also opportunities for on-campus faculty and staff to provide military spouses personalized support services during these high-tension times.

**Barriers: Family Readiness Group (FRG) Disconnection.** The second code under the barriers theme was FRG disconnection, which included the participants’ stress in life. Due to frequent relocations and the transient military lifestyle, the participants struggled to make new connections. The participants shared their experiences with support systems and on- and off-post challenges without an established FRG. The participants also discussed the frustration of transferring jobs and certifications across state lines and the financial barriers of new state training and expenses for employment in a new state. Connie stated,

One thing that happened during one of the deployments that was really beneficial and very helpful but is no longer the case was we were given some childcare hours. The actual unit we were in [was] a more vigorous unit, with deployments multiple times. Because they’re on a rotation, they deploy at least once a year. The on-post CDC [gave] us hours so the kids could be in childcare for free. I think it was 10 or 15 hours a week per kid; maybe it was 10. That gave a little bit of free childcare. It was very helpful because then you could just go to the commissary without kids. You could workout or just sit in your car [and] enjoy a cup of coffee, just having a moment.
Emily described the FRG as an amazing on-post opportunity and a resource for military spouses. She stated,

It’s kind of amazing how military wives come together and form really close bonds with people really quickly [because] you all understand what you’re going through. You all know what kind of help to offer or to force people to take. People have to force me to accept their help because I just don’t want to.

Vanessa said that FRG disconnection was an impactful aspect of the military spouse community, as FRGs were not always consistent post-to-post. She stated,

My perspective [is] you’re not going to just reach out to random resources all of a sudden if you’re not familiar with [them]. In previous years, when I was a new Army wife, I was like, “Oh, yeah, we have this FRG and everything.” But even that’s not 100% [of] the benefits of what military spouses really need.

Kaylene emphasized the differences in FRG support systems from post to post, suggesting that FRG leaders prioritize events that align with military spouses’ actual needs. She explained,

It just depended on the duty station because, [in] some duty stations, I’d have a really good support group [and] have a good military family group who would support each other. Some of the soldiers that Joe worked with that stayed behind [during deployments] on the Rear D offered help or assistance. But, for the most part, I was pretty much on my own, especially during [Joe’s] school.

Jessica had only lived on post twice since marrying her husband. She emphasized that there was less support for military spouses living off post than on post. She said,
We’ve lived on post in Alaska and Alabama, and we have not lived on post since being here in Georgia. For the past 2 years, we’ve lived off post. I’ve actually only been on post one time here in the past 2 years. [My husband is] on post in Savannah, and we live about 20 minutes away, right near Emily [another participant]. Emily has been my biggest resource of help. Meeting other military people has been the biggest help.

When we lived on post, I guess I was more aware of things that were available, but, honestly, I haven’t ever really used a lot of stuff. I’m not really aware too much of a ton of things that are available. That might be a little bit my fault. I don’t really get involved with FRG stuff and stuff like that because I work full time. I’m honestly so busy with my own stuff that I don’t really know a lot of what’s available.

Ashley had lived in two duty stations over the past 10 years and felt disconnected because her family lived off-post. She stated,

I know there’s counseling on post and some resources, per se, [that] I’m honestly not super familiar with. Hopefully, the battalion or unit would put out the resources or all the available resources, but I currently am not sure what is offered.

Hayden described her experiences with the FRG as positive, as it provided her opportunities for lasting friendships, understanding support systems, and reducing the stress of the military lifestyle. She stated,

I think that was probably the time of my life when I was the closest to my other military spouses. Because we lived on post, we walked our dogs together, we did walks with the kids together, went to the same playground, [and] stuff like that. But when we moved off post, it kind of went away, and my husband changes jobs a lot. It makes it difficult to remain close and keep a support system in place. Established, supportive, consistent, and
on-post interventions readily available to all military spouses are critical for navigating college and career opportunities. The campus community should provide student success initiatives to engage and support the military spouse student population.

**Barriers: Deployments.** The third code under the barriers theme was deployments. The participants reported that their spouses had undergone multiple deployments. Many returned to their parents’ homes for additional support during deployments, particularly those with children. The participants who stayed on-post during deployments reported having few resources available. Many participants also birthed their children during their spouses’ deployment. Deployments ranged from 6 to 18 months, with the families experiencing from one to five deployments. The participants also emphasized the lack of resources provided by the Rear-D Command during deployment.

Emily stated,

My husband has done five total [deployments]. We met right after his first deployment. I’ve been along for four of them with Ranger Battalion, which were 6-month deployments before we had kids. Then [there was] one [deployment] when we were in North Carolina at Fort Bragg that was a 9-month deployment, and our daughter was, I think, 6 or 7 weeks old when he left. He missed almost her entire first year. I was alone in North Carolina with all my family in the Midwest for her entire first year, and then he joined a deployment halfway through when we moved down here. He deployed in July of last year in the middle of [the] COVID [pandemic] and came back right after Thanksgiving, a couple of weeks after Thanksgiving.
Audie shared her experiences as a military spouse and the isolation of the military spouse lifestyle. She admitted feeling lonely during deployment but credited her success to her independence. Audie stated,

It does get lonely, and it can be hard. Being all the things all the time can get rough. But, um, honestly, it’s not bad. I can’t imagine doing it any other way. I’m just as active in my kids’ lives, taking them to school and doing sports and doing all the things. Life really doesn’t change for us when [my husband is] gone. It’s not hard for me when he’s gone. Maybe I’m just used to it, or I’m okay with being independent for my children.

I definitely see when [my husband is] gone [that my children] miss that male role model. Like when they’re around their friends who have dads with them, you can see them kind of gravitate [toward the fathers]. That’s heartbreaking for me because I know how desperately they need their dad. But for me, as a mom, nothing really changes. I just continue to do all the things I normally would.

Ashley stated,

[My husband] has been deployed once, I think with your husband, with Captain May, to Iraq. Then, he’s gone for training for months at a time. His deployment was, I think, 6 months, and we were newly married then, so I was used to being on my own. But now that we have a baby, my heart goes out to those spouses who have had to go through those 9-month or longer deployments and pick up all those responsibilities. I honestly can’t imagine what that’s going to be like or what that is like.

Hayden had a unique experience among the participants due to obtaining an advanced degree before marriage. She shared the trials, struggles, and joys of being a military spouse and issues useful for future research. She stated,
I’m Hayden. I’m from Louisiana, and my husband Kevin and I have been married for 10 years. He is active-duty Army, and we are stationed in Florida. We have three children, [who are] 6, 4, and 2 [years old]. I’m a multitasking mother with a Juris Doctorate, and I work full time.

A military spouse is someone whose husband takes the front seat in life. I think [the spouse’s] career takes [the] front seat in your life. You have to really be flexible [and] follow them around [because] their job really comes first. It’s a lot of sacrifice but also a lot of benefits, and I’m extremely proud of my husband [for] everything he’s done because he has sacrificed a lot.

Also, the family has to not only [have] time away from him but also pick up and move around the country whenever we have to move based on his orders or change in duty. I think it was 13 months that he [was] deployed [unexpectedly] when I was 7 months pregnant. He came home right before I gave birth and [was] deployed again 10 days later for 6 months. Those [were] his two deployments. I mean, they’re hard. Obviously, they’re even harder when you have children.

Kaylene described deployments as difficult and sudden events that provide little opportunity to plan. Similarly, Army-related schools that soldiers must attend for certification or promotion can also cause them to leave their families for months. Kaylene stated,

Ranger School was like 5 months, and that [was] like no contact whatsoever—not a letter or phone call or anything for that long period. I’d say Sapper School was 3 months, [and] I want to say [the experience was] the same. Airborne air assault [were other schools]. [In] all those different schools he’s gone to, he’s [had] very limited his time to communicate with us.
The lack of communication with family is a concern for most military spouses. Additionally, military spouses feel disconnected from their immediate families and do not know about on-post social networking and supportive roles for navigating the challenges of the military lifestyle.

**Theme 2: Desires**

The second emergent theme was desires, which resulted in four codes. The participants desired flexibility in education and the workforce. Reciprocity of credentials and licenses was another common statement in the interviews. The participants suggested that a U.S. Army liaison with knowledge of educational opportunities could provide information and a sense of belonging on campus and within the military community.

**Desires: Flexibility.** The first code under the desires theme was flexibility in education and the workforce. Military spouses must have flexible classes and class delivery to access higher education. Many military spouses have childcare concerns due to the inability to attend classes while acting as the primary parent due to the demands of the unique military lifestyle. Ashley stated, “[School is] more online now. I think just having those credits transferred and being applicable [would be useful]. Just finding a program in your area can be challenging.”

Danielle also wanted options for attending classes and cited the financial burden of childcare as a major barrier. She stated, “If you have kids, it’s [hard] trying to find a school you can go to [where] you can also have childcare and that time [and] afford to [pay for] both the childcare and school. Some schools offer online [courses], which is awesome.”

Emily shared her concerns regarding childcare and military life. Because the domestic workload was her sole responsibility, she had little room for professional development or education. She stated,
I don’t know what career I could have that would fit into this life that would fit into me having to be the primary caretaker for my kids 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, at a moment’s notice. If they get sick at school, I’m the one [who’s] got to get [them], which I think applies to women, kind of universally, anyway.

Similarly, Kaylene shared her concern about domestic work and desired accessible and flexible online classes to maintain her work-life balance. She said,

[I want to] just [be] more able to balance my entire life. When I had my schoolwork, I struggled a little bit because I had to get the kids to practices and school events. [I had] all of these things going on, intertwined with trying to maintain [and] keep up with Joe’s stuff that I had to take care of while he was gone.

Hayden discussed career opportunities due to her advanced degree and provided professional suggestions on easing the burden for military spouses seeking employment. She stated,

That’s very difficult [to find flexibility in work or school]. There [are] more remote jobs in this day and age. With COVID-19, remote jobs have become so much more popular. If we [could] have some type of advanced degree [and] remote jobs for the military spouse, either networking or more options for us, I think that would be huge. For women, in general, more remote jobs [would be beneficial] so that we can balance family obligations too. I think that that would go a long way for our society.

Higher education leaders and faculty members should consider the unique stresses of military spouses, specifically TDY events where the military spouse may be a single parent for an extended period (Lewis, 2020). The military’s lifestyle’s unique stressors might affect military spouses’ success in higher education (Sauerheber & Disque, 2016). Gonzalez (2020)
indicated the need for additional support for military spouses due to their unique needs as online learners. In this study, a major theme among all participants was the need for a flexible learning environment with remote and online learning opportunities for degree completion requirements. The active-duty military spouse population faces unique challenges and barriers that might not enable them to succeed in traditional learning environments. Issues such as spousal deployment, extended training, and work-life imbalance are significant barriers to military spouses’ educational success.

**Desires: Credentials and Licenses.** The second code under the desires theme was credential and license reciprocity. The participants indicated the need for reduced state fees for military families when reapplying for certificates across state lines due to PCS relocations. Hayden stated,

My job and career got significantly harder with my husband’s decision to join the military. I definitely decided to go to law school before he joined. Being an attorney, you can’t just practice in any state—you have to be barred in that particular state. With my husband’s job, I had to take the bar exam in North Carolina, and they only offer that two times a year. I couldn’t even take the first bar exam because I didn’t know where we were going to be stationed. I had to wait 6 more months to take the next bar exam. Then you have to wait about 2 months to get your results. That, right there, took me out of the workforce for 8 months, longer than my peers when they entered the workforce. I think if there were a federal law of reciprocity, specifically for military spouses, that would [also] go a long way to help.
Connie stated,

When we were living at our last duty station, it was easy for me to get to a city where I could just do the CU credits in the city [or] do a convention. That was the easiest part for me. I think, when I had my first [child], my parents lived kind of close to the convention. I was able to leave my child with [my] parents and go to the convention and pay to do that. I know that you can do a lot of things online, [but] I am not so great as an online learner, like doing it [myself] on a computer. I am a kinesthetic learner. I’m very much a visual kinesthetic [learner]. So, for me, [online learning] was not going to be helpful. That’s why going to conventions or conferences is so much more appealing to me.

So, this past October, I had to, and I’ve been a personal trainer since June 2003, but I haven’t used it since 2015. So I kept keeping it up just in case I would use it. So, this past October, I just realized I’m really not using it. And every time you recertify, you have to pay hundreds of dollars.

Kaylene described her licensure experiences and challenges across state lines as a barrier to her professional development and a financial burden impacting her professional growth. She stated,

I have to give up all my clients from one location to the other and reestablish myself. It was a challenge, but when I was working with Army Wellness Center, it was easy to transfer because it [was] within the military.

Danielle shared her experiences and challenges with higher education access and continuing her licenses across state lines. She suggested how to help military spouses in school, stating,
I wish there were options for military spouses, maybe like certain days off, certain timeframes, [or] more night schools for military spouses. Maybe schools could waive attendance policies or be flexible if a military spouse misses a week of classes because her husband got deployed and she needs to find a babysitter. I wish there were something for people that wasn’t so limited and better for people to actually be successful.

Additional support and transparent communication between on-post and on-campus resources are vital to military spouses’ educational success. Marketing teams or strategic partnerships could find ways to help military spouses access college applications, federal student aid applications, and scholarships.

**Desires: Army Liaison and Support Services.** Several participants wanted U.S. Army liaisons with knowledge of nationwide educational opportunities who could foster environments of belonging on campus. Many participants said they needed well-versed advocates who could help them tailor courses to their unique lifestyles. Such coaches could provide up-to-date scholarship information and other opportunities to improve military spouses’ higher education access. Many participants reported needing additional support with course costs, financial aid, scholarships, and time management resources.

Emily stated,

For whatever reason, I don’t think the message about the programs that the Army has to help you get translated well. It would be great if the Army had a liaison who could help military spouses navigate the educational system outside of Spousal Support Services because they don’t have tailored coaching [or] mentoring [or] really know the ins and outs of what is available.
Connie also mentioned the need for military spouses to have education insiders to assist with career coaching and access. She stated,

It’s so hard for us [military spouses] to find a job or do higher education or what have you. I feel there needs to be more people who actually understand the military process. There’s this one step of having, I don’t know if empathy is the word, but some sort of ground or understanding of you who military spouses [are] and what they go through on the daily. I think everyone’s got their subject matter of what they want to do, right? It’s like, okay, so you go and learn how to do X, Y, and Z. But I think there needs to be also almost like a life coach [who tells you] how you get to this point [and] to this point. In the path of all these PCS and starting over and every single city you’re in, how do you maneuver, or how can you get that job and get to the next place and continue advancing so that you can progress in the field you want? Right now, every time you move, you are back at entry level.

Danielle shared her experience with on-post soldier support centers while attempting to advance her degree and enroll in classes. She felt concerned about the support center’s information quality and the workers’ knowledge. She noted the workers did not know how to help her in the areas she needed most, such as the application process, program of study selection, and financial aid applications. She stated,

I don’t think they’re as educated as they could be on enrollment because I had to go through so many different people to get simple information. It’s hard because they make it seem easy on post—like you go to the center, and they’ll help you. They really don’t [help you]; they give you another number to call that tells you to call another number. It’s never just straight-up, helpful information; it’s kind of like digging to find it yourself.
Understanding the military culture, specifically the military spouse role, could enable higher education institution leaders to create better support systems (Chadwick, 2018; Gonzalez, 2021; Lewis, 2020). Institutions of higher learning should pair with on-post soldier support centers to support this transient student population. Each participant in this study emphasized the importance of flexible class schedules, remote coursework options, and professional development opportunities.

**Desires: Belonging.** The third code under the desires theme was belonging. The participants expressed the need for someone on campus who could assist them with their academic careers, provide career coaching, and foster effective learning environments centered around belonging. Audie stated, “Many military spouses need advisors who understand [we] need to take breaks and resume classes while juggling life as moms and wives.”

Connie said,

I move abruptly and frequently with no help. [It would help to have] someone on campus I can talk to when life does get hard, [whether] that be a counselor or therapist who understands the demands of my life and the roles I take on outside of being a student. Danielle expressed her desire for someone in the campus community to understand her background and life demands to better assist her academic journey. She stated

I just wish there were options for military spouses, maybe certain days off, certain timeframes, [or] more night schools for military spouses. In some schools, if you miss a certain number of classes or time, it ruins [school], like you don’t even pass. I wish there were something for people that wasn’t so limited, like if you can’t make it 3 days. You’re doing something better for people to actually be successful because [those limitations] really kill a lot of things that military spouses can do.
People [outside the military] don’t understand if someone deploys or a mission comes up—like the stuff that just happened in Afghanistan—[that our] spouses are gone. We don’t have people lined up for babysitting. A lot of us don’t trust people. May some are more versatile, but [many of us] don’t have the options and security as someone stable.

Kaylene said she wished instructors understood all she had to balance while separated from her spouse. She stated,

I definitely want to be able to balance my entire life. My schoolwork probably struggled a little bit because I had to get the kids to practices and school events. [I had] all these things going on, intertwined with trying to maintain and keep up with Joe’s stuff that I had to take care of while he was gone.

The desire to feel understood in the academic setting and the workplace was a major theme for all nine participants. The ability to create the physiological intervention of belonging on campus and in online class forums could be the key to engaging this student population.

**Theme 3: Supporting Roles**

The third emergent theme, supporting roles, contained two codes: spouse identity tied to the service member and primary parenting. Many participants directly or indirectly indicated that they tied their identities to their spouses. All the participants were primary parents for their children and personal assistants for their spouses who got actively involved in their spouses’ careers. All the participants needed to improve their work-life balance and found certain times more stressful, specifically deployments, long training exercises, and PCS moves.

An emergent theme was the participants’ role in their families and the role of their spouses. All the participants reported valuing their spouses’ dedication to the Army and
supported their spouses’ careers. The participants’ supportive role often resulted in imbalances in the family unit, as the military spouses took on the household demands and parenting while attempting to find and establish employment.

Vanessa stated, “Just being a military spouse is not about yourself. It’s about everyone else in your family and your husband’s job. It’s kind of like you just have to be really on. Not selfish. And just go with the flow.” Similarly, Connie said,

[Before] being a military spouse, I had my own career. As soon as I joined him, when we started having a family, all the things I had created for myself in terms of community and education and the career I had were completely erased and gone from needing to move with him. Since then, there [have] been many different avenues of life, identity issues, [and] trying to find jobs. I’m having to do other jobs for my spouse within the military to support an organization. That’s just kind of where I am now. I’m in a supportive role.

Even with her advanced degree, Hayden acted as a helpmate and supporter to her husband and put her career aside. She stated,

A military spouse is someone whose husband takes the front seat in your life. You have to really kind of be flexible [and] follow them around [because] their job really comes first. It’s a lot of sacrifice but also a lot of benefits, and I’m extremely proud of my husband for everything he’s done because he has sacrificed a lot. But the family has to manage not only with time away from him but also having to pick up and move around the country whenever we have to move based on his orders or change in duty. Supporting roles in modern society might appear dated to American families.

However, all the participants perceived themselves in lesser roles and supported their spouses’ careers. This finding resulted in a major theme.
Audie’s outlier experience in the sample provided further insight into military spouses’ education access. Audie, the spouse of an enlisted military member promoted to warrant officer, was a 30-year-old mother of two boys under the age of 6. She and her family had moved three times in 6 years and undergone one 9-month deployment. Audie lived a geographical bachelor lifestyle in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, as her active-duty husband remained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, over 4 hours away. Audie was pursuing her bachelor’s degree from an accredited online institution. Despite her relocation and separation from her husband due to deployment or geography, she maintained her higher education access and continued her progress toward degree completion.

Audie had a unique experience among the participants with accessing higher education and progressing toward her degree. She and her husband entered college at the same time. Because her online program enabled her to relocate to different states without tuition or transfer credit fees, Audie continued her education at the same institution. Audie said she was assigned a military advisor who helped her navigate scholarships and GI Bill benefits for paying for college. Audie considered flexibility the most helpful for accessing higher education. She stated,

I’ve been in school for 4 years. I graduate at the end of next year. The reason why that’s so funny is my husband started school [at] the same time I did, and he graduated this past summer. However, because of things like PCS moves, different little things like that, I [took] time off from school to make sure our family transitioned through whatever season we were going through. I have to take breaks every so often.

Just when he was getting back from Korea, I took the whole month off school because I wanted to spend that time with him. For me, school has taken much longer than
it would for the average person. At the same time, I’m super lucky because I get scholarships, I get all kinds of discounts, [and] I don’t pay a dime to get to school. The school that I go to, they are so understanding [and] they let me take breaks whenever I need. It’s really incredible. Honestly, even if it takes a little bit longer, it’s okay because I still get to live like the wife and mother I want to be.

As a qualitative researcher, I highlighted Audie’s experience as an outlier to better understand the gaps in student success outcomes. In this case, Audie presented opportunities for future research into HyFlex learning models, flexible degree management, completion deadlines, and military spouses’ success in accessing higher education while balancing a unique lifestyle.

**Cross-Sectional Analysis**

Sankoff (2008) used cross-sectional and longitudinal techniques to examine and investigate changes and variations within speech communities during the same period. In this study, I used Sankoff’s technique of identifying spoken language, body language, and patterns to better understand the similarities and differences in the participants’ learned experiences. Three overarching themes emerged from analytical memoing and coding the transcribed interviews and field notes: barriers, desires, and supporting roles. Data saturation occurred, and similarities emerged in the participants’ education at their time of marriage and their lived and learned experiences related to Family Readiness Group (FRG) engagement, deployment barriers and challenges, and Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moves.

Connie, Ashley, and Kaylene had similar educational experiences as active-duty Army officer spouses. Connie had completed her doctoral degree, but due to her husband’s responsibilities, frequent relocation, and rapid deployment, she was the primary care provider for their young children. She did not teach dance but opened a successful online business. Ashley
was a registered nurse with emergency experience; however, due to her husband’s deployment sequence and the birth of their daughter, she started a business from home as an independent photographer. Kaylene had been a stay-at-home mom before earning her degree online. She worked as a physical therapist at Fort Benning, but due to frequent PCS moves and the COVID-19 pandemic, she created an online physical fitness and virtual coaching business. These participants experienced numerous PCS moves across the country and deployments. They discussed supporting their spouses’ careers and taking on parental responsibilities. The participants rarely used their advanced degrees due to their spouses’ employment demands; however, they created employment opportunities for themselves.

Vanessa and Danielle also had similar experiences. Both participants had active-duty Army-enlisted spouses and were committed to their partners’ careers. Both participants described their role as supportive and reported being the sole parental figure in the homes for extensive periods. These participants identified FRG barriers leading to a lack of engagement and supportive opportunities for advancing their education while managing their households and rapid-deployment cycles.

Hayden, Emily, and Jessica were active-duty officer spouses who worked before marriage and continued to work while maintaining their households independently during deployment. Each participant shared the barriers of credentialing across state lines, the expenses of employment loss due to credentialing, and the struggle of starting over to establish reputations in their fields.

Audie was an outlier due to her success in accessing higher education years after her marriage; however, she did have commonalities with the other participants. Like Connie, Ashley, and Kaylene, Audie experienced cross-country PCS moves, was the primary guardian of her
young children, and supported her spouse. Audie’s spouse enlisted before his commission as an officer; therefore, she had experienced the same cultural commitments as Vanessa and Danielle shared. Like Hayden, Emily, and Jessica, Audie experienced rapid deployments due to her spouse’s military position and expertise. However, although Audie was the primary caregiver for her young children and had experienced rapid and frequent deployments with multiple cross-country PCS moves, she succeeded in accessing higher education. Audie was enrolled in an online, military-friendly institution to complete her bachelor’s degree. The participants often referred to nontraditional online learning in the second theme of desires. Audie had the online environment, flexible class schedules, and tailored mentors and advisors that the other participants wanted for their educational journeys.

This cross-sectional data analysis included memoing and coding that produced themes based on the participants’ lived and shared experiences. Using Sankoff’s (2008) cross-sectional analysis gave me additional opportunities to achieve saturation and analyze the patterns from the participants’ shared stories and experiences of accessing higher education.

Conclusion

This research was a unique opportunity to learn about the active-duty military spouse community. Postsecondary educational leaders should understand military spouses’ needs, desires, success stories, challenges, and transient and unique lifestyles to engage and support them as a growing student population. Three themes emerged from this qualitative ethnographic study of nine active-duty military spouses. The first theme presented military spouses’ barriers as a potential student population in the postsecondary educational system. The barriers of Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moves, Family Readiness Group (FRG) disconnections, and deployments caused additional stress to the family unit unique to this population. The second
theme, desires, presented the experiences or support services active-duty Army spouses would like to have to positively impact their student success. The participants’ desires included flexible course offerings and modalities, including additional opportunities for remote learning and employment. The desires theme included an Army liaison who could ensure military spouses have correct information and assistance when applying for college, completing required forms and selecting programs. Desires also included the physiological notion of belonging, which the participants wanted but did not always have on post. However, belonging is vital for military spouse engagement on campus, retention, and degree completion.

The study’s third theme was the participants’ roles in their families. All nine military spouses described their supportive roles in their spouses’ careers. This finding could be a unique opportunity for further research on active-duty military spouses’ higher education and workforce access.

The data produced three major themes: barriers, desires, and supporting roles. The study’s findings provided a better understanding of active-duty military spouses as a student population. Understanding the participants’ stories could enable postsecondary educational leaders to foster equitable and accessible learning environments so the members of this student population can achieve their student success goals.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the study’s methodology, sample selection criteria, participant recruitment, and findings. This qualitative ethnographic study focused on military spouses’ higher education access. As a transient population, military spouses face multiple relocations, separation from support systems, and spousal deployments, which could negatively impact their
This chapter presented three major themes: barriers, desires, and supporting roles. Each theme included several codes. The barriers theme included the codes of PCS moves, FRG disconnections, and deployments. The desires theme included flexibility in education and workforce, credential and license reciprocity, and U.S. Army liaison and belonging. The third theme was supporting roles, which included codes related to the participants having identities tied to their spouses and roles as primary parents. This study provided further insight into military spouses’ overwhelming work-life imbalance.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview of Study Findings

The purpose of this study was to tell the stories of active-duty Army spouses and their higher education access. This study included semi-structured interviews with nine active-duty Army spouses. The participants’ responses fell under three broad categories: the active-duty military spouse culture, challenges, and successes in accessing higher education, and overall thoughts on the military spouse culture and lifestyle. This study’s overarching research question was: What are the stories around factors in learning of Army active-duty military spouses achieving academic success in higher education?

The study’s three themes—barriers, desires, and supporting roles—were connected to the research question. Major takeaways included the participants’ barriers to accessing higher education, which were frequent Permanent Change of Duty Station (PCS) moves; disconnection from support services and groups, such as the Family Readiness Group (FRG); and frequent and often unpredictable deployment schedules. The participants discussed how to enhance their higher education and student learning outcomes. The findings suggest that Army spouses need a sense of belonging on campus, flexible course offerings, and HyFlex attendance policies to access courses remotely. Additionally, military spouses need on-post student service support staff and Army education liaisons well-versed in active military scholarships, transfer credits, and program offerings. A secondary finding was that all the participants highlighted their role as helpers in their spouses’ careers. At one point, each participant actively engaged in their FRG as leaders, taking time away from their professional goals to develop their spouses’ careers. Each participant provided valuable information about imbalanced domestic workloads, the
prioritization of their spouses’ military careers, and the toll of being sole providers due to multiple deployments and work-life balance stressors.

**Challenges of This Study**

There has been limited research on military spouses in general and even less on higher education access for military spouses in particular branches. This ethnographic study gave a voice to active-duty Army spouses to contribute to the literature on this student population. The study’s findings presented information on military culture and active-duty spouses’ unique and challenging lifestyles and higher education barriers. The study provided insight into the lives of active-duty Army spouses and their higher education access that other research methods may not have produced.

**Strengths of the Study**

Nine participants engaged in semi structured interviews, with data saturation indicating the study’s credibility. Overall, the study provided insight into the research question and a basis for future research. Although the participants discussed the support services they needed at higher education institutions for academic success, postsecondary educational leaders could improve more than student support services by learning more about the growing military spouse student population. Admissions and recruitment efforts for this population based on age, work-life demands, and schedules could be a way to strengthen and tailor the institution’s mission to include this student population. Academic advisors and career coaches could benefit from understanding the military spouse population to provide the optimal environment for student success. Educators who adopt flexible attendance policies and caring cultures foster welcoming learning environments and facilitate learning outcomes while demonstrating genuine concern for military spouses. Because research is in the initial stage of understanding this student population,
this study provided a foundation for future investigation into moving colleges toward a culture of care embedded in student success outcomes.

**Recommendations of the Study**

This research could show how to shape the postsecondary educational environment and prepare and educate the growing active-duty military spouse student population. Understanding military spouses’ strengths and barriers to accessing higher education could enable institution leaders to develop policies to improve belonging and course flexibility. Institution leaders could adopt student support programs and educate faculty and staff on military spouses’ unique lifestyles, challenges, and needs. Academic advisors, career coaches, and faculty mentors who receive training in or belong to the military community could significantly impact student success for this student population. Postsecondary educational leaders should foster a culture of care for this student population to address the needs of their unique, transient, and demanding lifestyle. Student support service professionals in North Carolina could create a framework for educational partners to adapt to their needs as they serve this student population. Faculty and staff with more knowledge of military spouses’ needs and lifestyles could improve retention and completion rates and help students with a caring culture. This study provided a voice to active-duty Army spouses seeking to access higher education so institution leaders can cultivate learning environments rooted in student success, accessibility, and equity.

**Theoretical Recommendations**

This study’s theoretical framework included the ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2007) and the learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda, 2004). The ambiguous loss theory was relevant and useful for understanding the military spouse culture and their higher education successes and barriers. I used the theory to focus on military spouses’ daily struggles
and life, which differ from their civilian counterparts. Using this lens to guide the research questions provided valuable insight for faculty and staff on how to create a sense of belonging for this growing student population.

Another foundation for this study was Baxter Magolda’s (2004) learning partnership model on self-authorship strategies. I used the model as guidance for the semi structured interview process and question categories. Educators can use Baxter Magolda’s model to access students’ experiences, which was the driving premise for this research. This study’s findings suggest that postsecondary educational leaders should view active-duty military spouses from professional, personal, and academic standpoints and use their vast experiences to improve learning outcomes and learning environments.

**Finding 1: Boss’s Theory of Ambiguous Loss**

The ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2004) was suitable for studying onset deployment and military spouses’ identities as helpmates to their military members. In this study, Vanessa stated, “Just being a military spouse is not about yourself. It’s about everyone else in your family and your husband’s job. It’s kind of like you just have to be really on. Not selfish. Just go with the flow.”

I used Boss’s (2004) ambiguous loss theory to address the implications of deployments and relocations, which often caused the participants to feel responsible for their families. For example, Connie said,

I’m extremely proud of my husband for everything he’s done because he has sacrificed a lot. But the family has to manage not only with time away from him but also pick up and move around the country whenever we have to move based on his orders or change in duty.
Ambiguous loss theory also applies to uncertainty common in military marriages that affects military spouses’ lifestyle and security. Many participants described needing to reset their lives upon deployment. Deployment can be challenging, as many military spouses must take on all the parenting and domestic workloads with little support. Emily recalled a deployment from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, saying,

My husband deployed again when our daughter was, I think, 6 or 7 weeks old. He missed almost her entire first year. I was alone in North Carolina with all my family in the Midwest for her entire first year.

The military spouse culture’s challenges affected the participants’ employment and educational advancement. Postsecondary educational leaders who understand this student population’s personal challenges could address those challenges and improve military spouses’ higher education access. Without Boss’s ambiguous loss theory, researchers might not grasp military spouse culture’s unique challenges and characteristics. The failure to understand military spouse culture could result in the failure to create learning environments of belonging and success for this student population.

**Finding 2: Baxter Magolda’s Learning Partnership Model’s Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda (2002, 2004) used the learning partnership model, specifically the self-authorship theory, to transform learning principles from cognitive and psychosocial development to a holistic approach with multiple learning domains (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Through the model, self-authorship has had a lasting and impactful impression on the discipline (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The learning partnership model addresses learners’ diverse backgrounds and suggests how to shape curricula and learning environments to suit these experiences. Some applications of this model include providing credit for workforce training in
the college curriculum or adjusting teaching methods to accommodate student learning styles. Researchers can use Baxter Magolda’s (2000, 2004) learning partnership model to highlight the unique experiences of military spouses as they strive to succeed while attending postsecondary educational institutions.

In this study, Connie shared how she supported her spouse’s career by leading the FRG, organizing fundraisers, preparing, and hosting battalion meetings, and connecting with the local community. She said,

There [have] been many different avenues of identity issues [and] trying to find jobs. I’m having to do other jobs for my spouse within the military to support the organization.

That’s just kind of where I am now—I’m in a supportive role.

Baxter Magolda’s (2002, 2004) learning partnership model as a theoretical framework, particularly the self-authorship aspect, is a vital lens for fostering the belonging that military spouses need to succeed in the higher education environment. In this study, Audie stated, “Many military spouses express the need [for] advisors who understand [we] need to take breaks and resume classes while juggling life as moms and wives.” Some curricula and high-flex attendance policies are adaptations of Baxter Magolda’s learning partnership model of self-authorship. These curricula and policies are means of hearing students’ voices and creating—not limiting—opportunities.

Baxter Magolda’s (2000, 2004) learning partnership model of self-authorship also focuses on the sense of belonging students need, both mentally and emotionally. In this study, Connie stated,
I move abruptly and frequently with no help, maybe someone on campus I can talk to when life gets hard, [whether that] be a counselor or therapist who understands the demands of my life and the roles I take on outside of being a student. Counseling and advising training could be a way to support military spouses in achieving their academic goals.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study included major takeaways on how to improve active-duty Army spouses’ higher education access. This research could indicate how to shape the postsecondary educational environment to prepare for and educate active-duty Army spouses. Postsecondary educational leaders could use this study to review their policies to ensure they adequately serve this student population. This study’s recommendations for practice include how to market programs for this transient and unique student population. Twenty-four-hour support services, online and virtual information sessions, and program information could be ways to address military spouses’ lifestyle demands and advance institutional visions of equity, access, and inclusion. Reviewing North Carolina’s articulation agreements and out-of-state articulation agreements for applicable programs could provide support for military spouses’ transience. Academic advisors, career coaches, counselors, and faculty could benefit from professional development on military culture, the military spouse lifestyle, and military spouses’ needs as students. Understanding these students’ strengths and barriers to higher education could enable institution leaders to create learning environments where military spouses of every branch can succeed. There is a need for additional research on military spouses’ higher education access. This study includes practice recommendations.
Recommendation for Practice 1: Marketing to This Population

A marketing campaign on military spouses’ needs as students could be a way to attract, recruit, and retain them until graduation. HyFlex course offerings and 24-hour advising and counseling services could enable military spouse students to navigate challenges to their success; Therefore, marketing should focus on these offerings for this student population. Additionally, supportive childcare options could address many barriers military spouses face. Postsecondary educational leaders could focus on on-post recruitment at the commissary or partner with FRGs to send meaningful messages that resonate with this student population.

Recommendations for Practice 2: Supporting This Population

Creating a culture of care and belonging for active-duty military spouses could be a way to improve their higher education access. Trained advisors and faculty who understand military spouses’ environments and needs could assist in creating a support system within their institutions to foster successful outcomes. Military spouses who experience frequent relocations could benefit from revised articulation agreements across state lines. Also, eliminating out-of-state expenses for active-duty military spouses could be a way to reduce military families’ financial stressors and provide opportunities for success.

Recommendations for Practice 3: Faculty Professional Development

Professional development incorporating the ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 2002, 2004) and the learning principle model (Baxter Magolda, 2004) on active-duty military spouses could enable faculty and staff to understand this often-isolated population. Training on military spouse culture and lifestyle could provide faculty insight into these students’ unique challenges. Professional staff could also benefit from professional development on how to help military
spouses select classes and advise those facing upcoming deployments, challenging training cycles, and work-life imbalance.

**Recommendations for Policy**

This study’s findings suggested recommendations for postsecondary educational policies for improving and supporting active-duty military spouses’ higher education access. This research indicates that postsecondary educational leaders should improve their institutions’ environments to prepare for and educate active-duty military spouses. Postsecondary educational leaders should review their policies to serve this student population adequately. Postsecondary educational leaders need to understand the active-duty military spouse student population to adjust or create policies to facilitate a caring culture rooted in equity, inclusion, and student success. This study’s findings suggest that institution leaders should adopt new frameworks for class options. Increased online and remote options, HyFlex options, and adjusted attendance policies for ongoing progress could enable military spouses to engage in various forums. Providing military spouses with flexible class schedules could improve their enrollment, retention, completion, and learning outcomes. Another policy recommendation is to hire military liaisons familiar with military spouses’ needs for advancing their education. A caring culture is essential for enabling the active-duty military spouse student population to access higher education. These policy recommendations are just the beginning. Postsecondary educational leaders should continue to develop frameworks to provide for military spouses’ needs based on additional research.

**Recommendation for Policy 1: Class Options**

Military spouses need to feel a sense of belonging on campus. Flexible course schedules, online offerings across degree specialties, and a stronger articulation agreement for transfer
students in North Carolina and the surrounding areas could positively impact the military spouse community. HyFlex attendance policies could provide increased access to courses when military spouses must learn remotely. Thus, adjusted attendance policies could be a way to retain this student population. HyFlex is a course-offering modality with hybrid in-person, online, and virtual sessions and flexible deliverables. HyFlex enables students to choose how to attend and participate in coursework (Rosen, 2021; Stewart & Bishop, 2022). The four leading HyFlex pillars are:

- Learner choice: Students choose the modality for participating in class each week.
- Equivalency: All modes have equivalent learning activities and objectives.
- Reusability: Learning activity artifacts in each mode are learning objects for students.
- Accessibility: Students have equitable access to all coursework, regardless of participation choice (Beatty, 2019).

The long-term goal of higher education HyFlex models is to increase learning opportunities while maintaining or increasing class attendance and participation by providing flexibility to diverse student populations (Jaggars et al., 2013). HyFlex options that provide flexibility and additional course opportunities increase student performance (Seaman et al., 2018) and student retention through more learning opportunities (Liu & Rodriguez, 2019; Samuel et al., 2019). The Community College Research Center (2019) indicated that college students desire more flexibility and options to engage with coursework. An increasing number of students care for dependents and work multiple jobs, averaging over 30 hours of work weekly (The Center for Community College Engagement, 2014). Therefore, many students could benefit from HyFlex college coursework. HyFlex courses enable students to take advantage of multiple
modalities (online, in-person, and virtual learning) and access course material regularly for improved student outcomes (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2014).

**Recommendation for Policy 2: Educational Military Liaison**

There is a need for student support services on each military installation to have Army education liaisons well-versed in active military scholarships, transfer credits, and program offerings at local postsecondary institutions that correspond with on-campus units, such as Veterans Centers and Green Zone training (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). The Army provides basic information at the Soldier Support Center; however, the workers are not education experts and are overworked and underprepared to assist with applications, FASFA, and advising. Green Zone training on many college campuses includes faculty training and professional development on military-affiliated students’ circumstances, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Military liaisons could present on-campus training and professional development on military spouses’ unique challenges and higher education barriers; however, military spouses lack these resources on-post. Having a place on-post for virtual, in-person, and group meetings could be a way to foster trust, collaboration, effective communication, and informed advising options for military spouses accessing higher education.

**Recommendation for Policy 3: Supporting Belonging**

Postsecondary educational leaders have enhanced student engagement with psychosocial interventions (Martinez & Munsch, 2019), facilitating learning environments where diverse students can gain a sense of belonging, resilience, and motivation (Edgecombe & Bickerstaff, 2018; Martinez & Munsch, 2019). Postsecondary educational leaders could incorporate military spouse students into the dialogue by creating support groups beyond the Veterans Support Center that provides Green Zone training. Institution leaders should expand and adopt policies to
facilitate belonging and foster military spouses’ academic student success. Faculty and staff who
are part of the military spouse community could host information sessions, attend recruitment
events, and mentor other military spouses in higher education.

Martinez and Munsch (2019) outlined postsecondary education strategies for improving
student belonging. Although there are many strategies for creating a sense of belonging on a
postsecondary educational campus, they have commonalities beneficial for active-duty military
spouses and the military spouse community at large:

- Intentionally and purposely onboarding new college employees to help them
  understand military spouse student demographics, needs, support, and resources: This
effort should be a way to espouse institutional values and student success goals. For
example, combining Green Zone training and professional development to provide a
better understanding of the active-duty military spouse student population could
improve their sense of belonging.

- Creating a robust social media platform to encourage student engagement and
  connection among the military spouse community: For example, postsecondary
educational institutions could use current resources to develop a team of student
leaders and employees to interact with students via social media, facilitate on-campus
and on-post events, and provide learning communities for the military spouse student
population.

- Encouraging active-duty military spouse students to participate in clubs and athletic
  programs.
• Encouraging academic department leaders to hold orientation programs for active-duty military spouse students’ degree programs and remain connected with regular meetings and special events.

There is still much to learn and more opportunities to create belonging on postsecondary educational campuses for active-duty military spouses. This framework could include all military spouses accessing higher education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Additional research on military spouses as a student population could enable postsecondary educational leaders to improve student outcomes. Literature has focused on military members or veterans, and military spouses remain underrepresented. To address this gap, this study focused on active-duty Army spouses’ higher education access. Despite the similarities across military branches, additional research could indicate how postsecondary educational leaders should provide support services for military spouses from different military branches. There is a need for additional inquiry on the workforce development aspects of this research to address the successes and challenges of military spouses who relocate across state lines and face license renewal and retraining barriers. Thus, scholars should research all aspects of the military spouse student population.

**Recommendation 1: Replicate the Study With Navy, Marine, and Air Force Military Spouses**

Expanding the population to include all military spouses, not only active-duty Army military spouses, could provide an opportunity to determine if some barriers are greater among specific military spouse populations. This research focused on active-duty Army spouses due to Fort Bragg, North Carolina’s proximity to several postsecondary educational institutions and my access and connections to this subset of the military spouse community. However, the
participants did not know if there were differences in accessing higher education between spouses from other military branches. Finding whether the Marines have a similar deployment schedule as the Army could indicate parallels in Marine and Army spouses’ challenges as they access higher education. Perhaps other branches do not have PCS moves as often as active-duty Army members and their spouses can find opportunities for degree completion at a single institution without the challenges of articulation agreements and transfer credit analysis. All military branches could have similar successes and challenges in accessing higher education; however, there is a need for additional research on how to implement and advance practice and policy suggestions.

**Recommendation 2: Focus Groups With the Participants**

Active-duty Army military spouses’ access to information, each other, and communities link to Family Readiness Group (FRG) successes and failures. FRGs are all-volunteer groups under the supervision and guidance of company commanders and at the request of battalion commanders. A focus group of FRG participants and leaders could be a way to advance military spouse understanding and nature and address on-post needs, desires, and support while accessing higher education.

The FRG was established in 1980 to address the demands of military spouses’ unique and often complex lifestyles. A focus group with FRG participants could provide insight into the resources needed by this student population. Understanding military spouses’ needs, challenges, and successes could allow FRG leaders and members to support them in accessing higher education on post and influence on-campus policies and practices.

Connolly (2010) presented a focus group methodology recommended to advance this research by incorporating the values and social norms of volunteer-based leadership and
institutions. This framework is fitting for the Army FRG, which is overwhelmingly women-driven and led. At the neighborhood level of volunteerism, women affiliated with the community are primarily the social capital used to influence public safety, social norms, resources, and inner community connections (Connolly, 2010). Neighborhood-based, all-volunteer organization leaders must understand their communities’ needs and foster community values within the institution to build relationships. Such knowledge can contribute to the formulation of future research questions to better understand military spouses' educational journeys, specifically their access to higher education and retraining opportunities as lifelong learners that also meet the needs of their unique culture and lifestyles. Scholars could use Frazer and Lacey’s (1993) liberal-communitarian debate and Connolly’s (2010) psychological theory to better understand FRG leaders’ role in supporting military spouses’ higher education access. Gilligan (1993) stated the motivation behind women’s voluntary community service is their caregiving ethics. The women who typically participate in these leadership roles reflect concern for others and desire interconnectedness (Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Friedman, 1992; Young, 1995). Gilligan (1993) stated that the women who lead volunteer organizations often model a gender identity that causes them to maintain a web of human connections valuable for hosting focus groups with FRG leaders and participants.

**Recommendation 3: Case Study Design**

There has been little research on Army spouses’ higher education access. Thus, there was a need for an ethnographic study on this student population. This ethnographic study provided a voice to active-duty Army spouses accessing higher education. Scholars could use the case study approach to gain further insight into active-duty military spouses’ culture, barriers, and lifestyles. Qualitative approaches are guided by process and understanding and can yield a variety of
perspectives (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research is a way to uncover the meaning of something; thus, the outcome expresses value and underlying meanings (Krathwohl, 1998). A descriptive case study would include concern for the process, qualitative analysis, and a value component to the meaning of the outcomes (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Yin (1998) stated that descriptive case study research focuses on “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon are not clearly evident” (p.13). Comparing various North Carolina community colleges, as examples of postsecondary educational institutions, based on their practices and policies related to military spouses’ higher education access could contribute to the research and have a lasting impact. The descriptive case study approach could address commonalities among postsecondary educational institutions. Scholars could use the institutional comparison framework to conduct research based on Audie’s experiences with higher education. Audie was an outlier in this study due to her experiences with higher education, advanced support services, HyFlex course offerings, and trained advisors familiar with military culture’s needs and demands. Scholars could compare services and explore practice and policy recommendations in descriptive case studies to further research military spouses’ educational journeys as they access higher education and retraining opportunities in postsecondary educational institutions and establish a best practices framework.

**Recommendation 4: MilSpouseEd Documentary**

A multimedia digital documentary could contribute to active-duty Army spouses’ higher education access. The documentary could be in the format of two documentaries that have impacted postsecondary educational institutions, faculty, staff, and students: No Greater Odds and Roadtrip Nation. Postsecondary educational leaders could use this research to present a multimedia documentary to shape learning outcomes and student success. A presentation could
use this insight coupled with the aspirations of creating a work that shapes the culture of postsecondary educational institutions to showcase military spouse access to education. This ethnographic multimedia representation could assist in giving a voice to active-duty Army military spouses as they access higher education.

**Conclusion**

Active-duty Army spouses’ education access is greatly impacted by the demands of their unique and often complex lifestyles. Postsecondary educational leaders who understand military spouses’ needs, challenges, and successes could cultivate learning environments for this population rooted in student success, accessibility, and equity. More flexible class schedules, HyFlex options, and alternative attendance procedures could enable active-duty Army spouses to access higher education opportunities suitable for their unique lifestyles that could forever impact their futures. Providing professional development opportunities across the postsecondary education campus could enable advisors, career coaches, financial aid advisors, faculty, and staff to create an environment of belonging and establish a caring culture for this student population. Postsecondary education leaders should foster a sense of belonging on campus among this student population to limit the challenges of accessing education and shape the learning culture. Analysis of active-duty Army spouses’ needs, desires, and culture could indicate how to develop partnerships between the DoD and North Carolina community colleges to provide this population with every opportunity to succeed in higher education. Military spouses have significant financial constraints due to their unique lifestyles. Therefore, postsecondary educational institutions should provide easily accessible information on financial aid, scholarships, and grants to this student population both on post and on campus. Despite opportunities for military spouses to access higher education with fewer financial barriers, they cannot always easily
access many of these resources. Opportunities to reduce the financial burdens of higher education have many forms. Military spouses can use their spouses’ GI Bill if eligible. Military spouses can also apply for scholarships, loans, and grants; however, they could be unable to access these resources easily. Accordingly, this research presented resources for military spouses accessing higher education. Appendix D contains scholarship opportunities compiled from various websites.

Military spouses require easily accessible information on scholarship opportunities. There is a need for future research, as military spouses remain underrepresented in scholarly journals. This unique student population is essential to postsecondary education. Researchers should devote attention to the active-duty Army spouses’ stories and cultures as they enter institutions of postsecondary education, walk the halls, attend classes, and serve the country as heroes of the home front.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented this ethnographic study’s findings on active-duty Army spouses’ higher education access. Interviews with nine active-duty Army military spouses underwent analysis and cross-sectional examination to find themes on how postsecondary educational leaders can better serve this student population. The themes from this study led to a further analysis of the study’s strengths, challenges, and theory and practice recommendations. There is still much to learn about this growing student population, which remains vastly underrepresented in literature. Future researchers and practitioners could use this study to engage in impactful practices and improve all military spouses’ higher education access.
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Appendix A: Pre-Interview Demographic Questionnaire

Military Spouse Access to Higher Education

Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study!

The purpose of the interview is to talk about your stories and experiences being an Army spouse while accessing higher education.

For your reference, I would like to disclose information about human subjects documentation:

There are minimal risks and no benefits regarding participation in the interview. Your name and other identifying information will appear in a documentary format shared with community college and university faculty as part of my doctoral dissertation at North Carolina State University. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview process.

The following questions include general demographic information relevant to the study. This data will also provide background information for inclusion as I narrate your story in my findings. The questions are mostly open-ended, so you can be as detailed in your responses as you like. The more information provided will only enhance YOUR story!

Completing the questions below will serve as your consent to participate in the study. However, I will reconfirm your consent to participate verbally before the scheduled interview begins.

Thank you!

Maggie May
Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey

First and last name: _______________________

1. What is your age?
2. What was your age when you married your spouse?
3. What was your age when you began college courses?
4. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other
5. Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these (select all that apply):
   a. Spanish
   b. Hispanic
   c. Latino
   d. None of These
6. Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:
   a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   e. White
   f. Other (specify) ________________
7. What was your marital status when you first enrolled in higher education (post-high school)?
8. How many children, if any, did you have while enrolled?
9. What was your employment status while enrolled (e.g., full-time, part-time, unemployed but looking, unemployed not looking, disabled, or a combination)?
10. What level of education have you acquired?
11. Did you complete your degree prior to marrying your military spouse?
12. How many years, if any, did you take off before beginning your college career after completing high school or its equivalent?
13. How many years, if any, did you take off before completing your degree?
14. How many PCS moves have you and your family experienced?
15. How have PCS moves impacted your degree completion?
16. How many deployments has your family experienced?
17. What days/times are most convenient for you to schedule a recorded 1-hour Zoom interview with no distractions?
18. What days/times are most convenient for you to schedule an in-person interview with no distractions?
19. What is your email address? __________________
   What is the best phone number to reach you? __________________
20. Please use the space below if you have any questions about the study or this questionnaire or want to provide any additional information about yourself before the interview
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Name: ____________________  Time Started: ____________________
Date of Interview: _____/_____/_____  Location: _______________________

Hi!

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview with me. The purpose of this interview is to talk about your stories and experiences as an Army military spouse accessing higher education.

I would like to remind you that this interview is being recorded, and I want to take this time to reiterate information about human subjects documentation that was included in the questionnaire. There are minimal risks and no benefits regarding participation in this interview. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time during the interview process.

Do you agree to continue to be recorded and continue with the interview? Yes_____ No _____

Do you agree to participate in this interview and understand it will be disseminated in a multimedia presentation or documentary with no royalties awarded to participants? Yes___ No__

Great, thanks!

I expect this to last about an hour. Do you have any questions before we get started?

This interview has three parts. I am going to start by talking about your life as an Army military spouse. Then, we will discuss your time as a student enrolled in higher education (vocational/trade, community college, or university), and then we will finish with some questions about your overall thoughts.

I have about 20 questions for all of my interviewees; however, some of your responses may prompt additional follow-up questions. As I mentioned before, this is an ethnography study, so you can talk freely, and it would be helpful for you to be as detailed in your responses and include as much information as you remember.

MILITARY SPOUSE EXPERIENCES

1. Tell me about how your life experiences as a military spouse.
   a. You can start at any point in your life.

2. Tell me about PCS moves.
   a. How many times has your family PCSed?
   b. How many states have you PCSed to? Any international moves?

3. How many deployments has your spouse been on?
   a. Tell me about those experiences, challenges, and support you received during those times.
b. Did you have children during your spouse’s deployment? What support (e.g., family, military, friends) did you have during the deployments?

STUDENT ENROLLMENT
1. Tell me about your educational experiences both prior to marriage and during your marriage.
2. What are the most challenging aspects of accessing higher education as a military spouse?
3. What would help you achieve your educational goals?

OVERALL THOUGHTS
1. What are your educational goals?
2. What support services would you like to see within the college campus community?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experiences as an Army military spouse accessing higher education?

PROMPTS, IF NEEDED
1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. What would you like to have done differently?
3. What do you think others can learn from your story?

Those were all the questions I had. I will turn the recording off now. Time: _______________

Thank you so much for your time today. I greatly appreciate it. The next step is for me to edit the interview and create a multimedia representation of your story into a documentary. If you have any questions or think of anything else you’d like to add to your interview responses, please feel free to contact me at any time. Thank you again!
Appendix D: Internal Review Board Approval

Bartlett - 24185 - IRB Protocol assigned Exempt status
1 message

IRB Administrative Office <pins_notifications@ncsu.edu> Mon, Aug 23, 2021 at 7:35 AM
Reply-To: ncuirboffice@ncsu.edu
To: mebartle@ncsu.edu

Dear Michelle Bartlett:

Date: August 23, 2021
IRB Protocol 24185 has been assigned Exempt status
Title: MilSpouseEd: Ethnographic representation of active-duty Army military spouses
access to higher education.
PI: Bartlett, Michelle E

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been
approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations
(Exemption: 46.101. Exempt d.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is
as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This
approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to
implementation.

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code
   of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is:
   FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and
   approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems or adverse events occur, they must be reported to
   the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the
   unanticipated problem form on the IRB website: http://research.ncsu.edu/
   sparc/compliance/irb/submission-guidance/.
4. Any unapproved departure from your approved IRB protocol results in non-
   compliance. Please find information regarding non-compliance here:

Please let us know if you have any questions.

********************************

NCSU IRB Office
Appendix E: Military Spouse Scholarship Information

**MyCAA:** My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) is a program that was designed to assist in financial aid for all eligible military spouses who are pursuing portable careers. The assistance program provides up to $4,000 in financial aid for over 2 years. Not all military spouses will be eligible for MyCAA. Spouses of active military members in pay grades E-1 to E-5, W-1 to W-2, and O-1 to O-2 can be eligible. You must have also completed high school and be on Title 10 military orders. National Guard and Reserves military spouses are also eligible for MyCAA. If you are legally separated or are under a court order, you are not eligible. If National Guard or reserve spouses are under warning orders, alert status, or post deployment military spouses may not be eligible. MyCAA is open to military spouses pursuing careers that need licenses, certifications, or an associate degree (MyCAA, 2022).

**Post-9/11 and Forever GI Bill:** For military members who have served and choose not to use their eligible Post-9/11 or Forever GI Bill, they may transfer it to their military spouse or children. Military members can choose to transfer all or a partial amount of their VA financial aid to their spouse or children (GI Bill, 2022). The assistance they receive from these bills will be determined by the amount of time they have served as military personnel. With a minimum of 10 years total of service, you can transfer up to 36 months’ worth of education benefits to their eligible spouse or dependent (GI, Bill, 2022). For the Post-9/11 Bill, the military member must have completed 6 years of military service and then agree to another 4 years of service to make a total of 10 years. The spouse or dependent receiving the benefits must be first enrolled in DEERS (Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System) to be eligible for the transfer of the financial aid.
Military Spouse Assistance Programs: Another way that military spouses can receive educational benefits is through assistance programs. Every branch of the military has its own assistance programs, so you will need to investigate the one specifically for your branch. Here are a few of the programs that are great for education assistance.

Army Emergency Relief Spouse Education Assistance Program: The AER program can help military spouses obtain their education on a need-based scholarship. The program can help you revive 4 years of full-time schooling and 8 years of part-time academics. If you are eligible, it can be used to get your first undergraduate degree (AER, 2022).

Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society Education Assistance Program: The NMCRS program can be used by a navy spouse who is pursuing higher education. For education assistance, the program offers loans and grants that are completely interest-free. The grants or loans can range anywhere from $500 to $3,000 per year for academic purposes. This can be used for either active duty or retired navy service members and eligible spouses.

Coast Guard Mutual Assistance Supplemental Education Grant: The CGMA program is designed for Coast Guard spouses that are seeking a college degree, technical training certificate, or a vocational degree. The assistance programs offer financial assistance by reimbursing spouses rather than paying upfront for their education.

There are several scholarships available to military spouses accessing higher education. Here is a collection to enhance this research and provide opportunities for military spouses to access higher education.

Hope for the Warriors: Since 2006, the Spouse/Caregiver Scholarship Program has awarded over 140 scholarships totaling more than $412,000 to the military spouse student.
population. These scholarships provide aid and continuing education at reputable, accredited universities, colleges, or trade schools (Hope for the Warriors, 2022).

Currently, HOPE offers the following scholarships:

- **Honorary Scholarship**: Awarded to military spouses seeking a graduate or a postgraduate degree.
- **New Beginnings Scholarship**: Awarded to military spouses pursuing associate’s and entry-level classes or training.
- **Restoring Family Scholarship**: Awarded to military spouses of the Fallen.
- **Restoring Hope Scholarship**: Awarded to military spouses seeking a degree of Master of Social Work.
- **Restoring Self Scholarship**: Awarded to military spouses seeking a bachelor’s degree.

Eligibility for Hope for the Warriors scholarships is based on a spouse or caregiver’s ability to show their post-9/11 service member or veteran sustained a combat-related injury and/or has a 100% permanent and total VA disability. “The Hope for The Warriors Scholarship Program considers a combat-related injury to be an injury caused by armed conflict, hazardous duty, instrumentality of war, and simulated war” (Hope for the Warriors, 2022). These scholarship awards are made payable to the recipient’s institution and include tuition, books, and supplies. The Hope for Warriors scholarships are for U.S. colleges and universities only.

**ThanksUSA Special Military Spouse Scholarships**: The Purdue University Global/ThanksUSA Scholarship awards a full tuition scholarship for an eligible military spouse for an online undergraduate degree program at Purdue University Global. The Linda J. Romeo/ThanksUSA scholarship grants $4,000 to a female military spouse residing in the Washington, DC, area attending Northern Virginia Community College.
**Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarship Program:** Sponsored by the National Military Family Association, this program grants scholarships ranging from $500 to $1,000 to spouses of active duty, retired, and Reserve/Guard members to pursue postsecondary or graduate degrees and professional training programs.

**The Military Spouse Preference Program:** Also provides support for eligible military spouses seeking employment within the Department of Defense, to include civil service careers overseas. Military spouses are encouraged to contact the human resources office on post at their respective duty stations or visit MilitaryONE Source to apply for the Priority Placement Program for military spouses to begin this employment process. The Defense State Liaison Office, an annex of the Department of Defense, has worked to streamline state licensing procedures for military spouses to make it easier for them to find a job (MilOneSource, 2022). These streamlined procedures still require the military spouse to apply for a license, which can cause delays and additional financial burdens of application fees. Military spouses can apply for up to $1,000 from their service branch in licensure and certification costs resulting from relocations or military moves within the United States or OCONUS to stateside to assist with the financial burdens of reciprocity.

**The National Military Family Association Scholarship:** Can be used by military spouses for both education assistance and employment purposes. The NMFA awards selected individuals with an average of $500 to $1,000 to achieve their education goals. Recipients can use the award for any education purposes, from degrees, certifications, licenses to technical degrees. This program typically offers applications to spouses twice a year, so make sure to look both at the beginning of the year and the end.
The American Military Partner Association: One of the largest support systems for military members and their spouses to obtain a higher education. This scholarship is designed for not just military spouses but also their families and LGBTQ service members. AMPA supports all education goals and can help you gain a higher education. The award generally offers $1,000 to $2,500 for your education assistance. Another great thing about this scholarship is they don’t require you to answer personal questions. When you apply for the scholarship, you don’t have to identify as LGBTQ or any sexual orientation.

Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance: Provides opportunities to reach higher education or training for eligible military spouses or children of the Fallen. The program offers a number of benefits that range from a housing allowance, books, and supplies to tuition assistance.

Military Discounts for College: The discounts can range from a small percentage of tuition to a discount that depends on the degree choice.

National Defense Authorization Act: Military spouses can apply for up to $1,000 to help in the relicense or certification due to PCS moves or relocation across the country.

National Military Family Association (NMFA): A nonprofit that partners with schools and organizations to help spouses seeking scholarships, licenses, certificates, training, continuing education credits, exams, or help with fees.

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA): An advocacy organization for Veterans and all people with disabilities. They provide scholarships for PVA members and their immediate family members.
Disabled American Veterans (DAV): Auxiliary provides tuition assistance for injured veterans and immediate family members for educational opportunities/certificate programs that are not traditional schools or universities.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS): In addition to grief counseling services, this nonprofit offers an Education Support Services department that has a scholarship guide and free coordinator to help military spouses receive all benefits and additional opportunities available.

Society of Military Spouses in STEM (SMSS): A nonprofit run by military spouses with the purpose of helping spouses interested in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers. They provide mentors and connections to scholarships for spouses seeking to advance their careers.

Army Women’s Foundation: Provides scholarships to women past and present in the military and their descendants. Many military spouses were active-duty and made a career shift in response to family circumstances and/or their spouse’s career.

The Rotary Foundation: Provides educational scholarships to anyone outside of Rotary Club members and their families. Almost anywhere you are stationed, including internationally, you can find a Rotary Club.

Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Unmet Needs Program: This national nonprofit provides many different forms of advocacy and support. The Unmet Needs Program is for military families experiencing financial difficulty. Their direct monetary assistance can help offset unforeseen expenses.
**Academic Top Scholars (ATS):** Accessible to all dependent children, age 24 and under, and all spouses of active-duty U.S. Military service members are eligible to apply for scholarships with ThanksUSA.

**AFCEA Educational Fund:** Provides $2,000 to students pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree while employed in the science or technology disciplines directly related to the mission of AFCEA. afcea.org/education/scholarships

**Air Force Aid Society General George S. Brown Spouse Tuition Assistance Program (STAP):** Administered by the Air Force Aid Society that provides tuition assistance to the spouses of active-duty U.S. Air Force service members residing overseas. worldwidelearn.com/military/Family

**Air Force Aid Society General Henry H. Arnold Education Grant Program:**

Provides $2,000 grants to selected sons and daughters of active-duty, Title 10 AGR/Reserve, Title 32 AGR performing full-time active duty, retired, retired Reserve, and deceased Air Force members; spouses (stateside) of active-duty members and Title 10 AGR/Reservists, and surviving spouses of deceased personnel for their undergraduate studies. afas.org/Education

**Allied Van Lines 2020 Military Scholarship:** Opportunity of offering our first ever Military Logistics/Supply Chain Management/Operational Management Scholarship, available to all those current or former active-duty military and their dependents who qualify. allied.com/military-scholarship

**American Legion Auxiliary Department Scholarship:** Applicants must be sponsored by an Auxiliary Unit, be the child of an honorably discharged Veteran, be a Florida resident, and attend school in Florida
American Legion Legacy Scholarship: Available for children or legally adopted children of active-duty U.S. Military and Guard and Reserve personnel who were federalized and died on active duty on or after September 11, 2001.

American Legion Auxiliary Scholarship for Nontraditional Students: Available to current dues-paying (for the past 2 years) member of the American Legion, Auxiliary, or Sons of The American Legion who is a student who has had at least 1 year of college and needs financial assistance to pursue an undergraduate degree.

America’s Child – Higher Education Assistance: Established to provide college education and welfare assistance to the surviving children of military heroes who have already given their lives in patriotic service to their country, fighting our nation’s war against terrorism as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and the Philippines, Operation Iraqi Freedom, or future conflicts. americaschild.org

AMVETS – Dr. Aurelio M. Caccomo Family Foundation Memorial Scholarship: Awarded to Veterans, including members of the National Guard and Reserves, who are seeking new skills to be competitive in the job market.

AMVETS National Scholarship Program: Available to financially assist Veterans who have exhausted government aid or who might not otherwise have the financial means to continue their education.

AMVETS Scholarships: Annually awards scholarships to Veterans/active military, their sons, daughters, or grandchildren. A son, daughter, or grandchild of a deceased Veteran is also eligible.

Ankin Law Office Scholarship for Military Veterans: Scholarships of $1,000 each are offered to Military Veterans or immediate family members and Disabled Veterans. These
scholarships differ from most others, as the veteran can choose between trade/vocational schools, 2-year colleges, or 4-year universities.

**Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association Scholarship:**
Scholarships of $2,500 each are offered to active-duty and honorably discharged U.S. Military Veterans (to include Reservists and National Guard personnel) of the Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom operations. Candidates must be majoring in certain fields of study; see application for details.

**Armed Forces Crossroads Scholarships for Military Children:** Offered to college-bound military children at installations served by a commissary. Open to qualified sons and daughters of U.S. Military ID card holders to include active-duty members, Reserve and Guard members, and retirees. afcrossroads.com/education

**Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA) Scholarships:** For college-level education of members of the AAAA, and the spouses, unmarried siblings, unmarried children, and unmarried grandchildren of current and deceased AAAA members. quad-a.org

**Army Emergency Relief Dependent Children Scholarship Program:** The MG James Ursano Scholarship program is for dependent children of Service Members on federal active duty, retired, or deceased while in active or retired status.

**Army Emergency Relief: Stateside Spouse Education Assistance Program:** To provide spouses of active duty and retired Service Members and widows(ers) of Service Members who died either on active duty or in a retired status and residing in the U.S. with need-based financial assistance in pursuing educational goals.
Army Scholarship Foundation: One-year financial scholarships awarded based on academic record and participation in school and community activities. armyscholarshipfoundation.org/scholarships

Army Women’s Foundation: The Army Women’s Foundation recognizes the importance of education and the role it plays in personal, professional, and economic fulfillment. The Army Women’s Foundation Legacy Scholarship Program provides grants to women soldiers, past and present, and their lineal descendants to help them attain their educational goals. The Legacy Scholarship Program offers financial support in four areas: certificate programs, community college coursework, undergraduate degrees, and graduate degrees. Scholarships are awarded only for coursework from accredited institutions. Scholarships are based on merit, academic potential, community service, letters of recommendation, and need. Community College and Certificate Program Legacy Scholarships will be awarded up to $1,000. College, University, and Graduate Program Legacy Scholarships will be awarded up to $2,500.

Chief Petty Officer Scholarship Fund: For qualified family members of Chief Petty Officers, including spouses and children (natural born, adopted, or stepchildren). cposf.org

Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation: Providing college scholarships and educational counseling to military children who have lost a parent in combat or accidents. Our vision is that every such child can have a debt-free college education. fallenpatriots.org/

Coast Guard Exchange System Scholarship Program: Scholarships to students who are dependents of Coast Guard active duty, reserve, and military retired members, current civilian NAF and APF employees, and current Coast Guard Auxiliarists that meet eligibility requirements. uscg.mil/mwr Collects and disburses donations in support of Service Members and
their Families in need, including assistance with airfare, special medical attention, college tuition for the children of Service Members, and more.

**Colonel Christie Marine Corps Scholarship:** Monthly stipend given to a former enlisted Marine leaving the Marine Corps to attend a 4-year institution. This award recognizes a Marine who has demonstrated exceptional courage and integrity in the face of great obstacles.

**Deeb Scholarship:** Applicants must be adopted or orphaned (documentation is required) and eligible for financial aid. Selection is based upon financial need and merit.

**Dolphin Scholarship Foundation:** Grants are available, on a competitive basis, to high school or college children/stepchildren (unmarried, under age 24 at time of deadline) of: (1) members or former members of the Submarine Force who have qualified in submarines and have served in the Submarine Force for at least 8 years; or of (2) Navy members who have served in submarine support activities (e.g., submarine bases, tenders, and rescue vessels) for a minimum of 10 years.

**Earl Jennings Puckett Memorial Scholarship:** The scholarship is awarded annually in the amount of $5,000 to an eligible applicant that fully embodies the spirit of service in their community as determined by the Patriot Legacy Fund scholarship committee. patriotlegacyfund.org/scholarships

**Education Connection:** The scholarship is to help fund Veterans, Active Duty Members, and Military Spouses college education. educationconnection.com/online-colleges/scholarship-for-veterans

**Education Dynamics:** Annual $500 scholarship for students studying to be medical assistants. There is an essay contest where students have to answer the question: “Inspiration can come from anywhere – a teacher, a friend, a positive or negative experience. What inspired your
choice to become a medical assistant?” medicalassistants.school/#scholarship Check out the full details/rules here: https://www.myscholarship.app/medical-assisting-scholarship/rules

**Fallen Warrior Scholarship Fund:** Established to provide financial assistance in the form of scholarships to U.S. military family members of our Fallen Warriors in their pursuit of higher education.

**Federal Pell Grant Program:** Provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate and certain post baccalaureate students to promote access to postsecondary education. Grants may be used at any one of approximately 5,400 participating postsecondary institutions.

2.ed.gov/programs

**Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG):** Provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students to promote access to postsecondary education. Students can receive these grants at any one of approximately 4,000 participating postsecondary institutions. Priority is given to those students with “exceptional need” (those with the lowest expected family contributions [EFCs] at the institution) and those who are also Federal Pell Grant (see # 84.063, also under topical heading “Federal Student Aid”) recipients.

2.ed.gov/programs

**FFGC Scholarship for High School Students:** Applicant must be a resident of Florida, will attend or is attending a Florida school, and must demonstrate financial need. Botany, city planning, ecology, forestry, landscape design, marine biology.

**Fisher House Foundation Scholarship Programs:** Open to sons and daughters of active duty, reserve/guard, or retired military commissary customers. militaryscholar.org

**Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program:** Applicant must be a Florida resident and a U.S. citizen or eligible noncitizen who does not owe a repayment or be in default under
any state or federal grant, loan, or scholarship program unless satisfactory arrangements to repay
have been made.

**Florida Engineering Foundation Scholarship:** Applicant must have minimum 3.5 GPA
and minimum 600 math and 500 verbal SAT scores and be enrolled at one of four ABET-
accredited institutions in Florida.

**Florida Student Assistance Grant Program (FSAG):** Applicant must be a U.S. citizen
and Florida resident for a minimum of 12 months prior to the start of classes and be enrolled in
an eligible undergraduate academic degree program. FAFSA is required.

**Florida Work Experience Program:** Applicant must be a U.S. citizen or eligible
noncitizen who is a Florida resident with a minimum 2.0 GPA. Program provides students the
opportunity to secure work experiences that complement and reinforce their educational
programs and career goals. Award amount is based on the number of hours a student worked.

**Folds of Honor Foundation:** Folds of Honor Foundation (FHF) provides postsecondary
educational scholarships to the spouses and children of Service Members disabled or killed
because of their military service to our great nation. Can be applied to schooling now or held by
Folds of Honor on behalf of young children until needed at the time of enrollment.
foldsofhonor.com/

**Freedom Alliance Scholarship Fund:** Students are eligible if they are the dependent
child of an active-duty Service Member who was killed or permanently disabled (100%) rating
as the result of an operational mission or training accident or who is currently certified as POW
or MIA.
Heroes’ Legacy Scholarships: Open to dependent unmarried children under age 23 of those who have died or have become disabled through their active military service on or after September 11, 2001.

Hill & Ponton Disability Attorneys: Hill & Ponton is offering four $1,000 scholarships to help veterans further their education and enter a career field that would, in turn, help other veterans. hillandponton.com

Hope for the Warriors: The Spouse/Caregiver Scholarship program identifies, recognizes, and rewards spouses/caregivers for their strength, fidelity, and resolve despite adversity. Scholarships aid in continued education at a reputable, accredited university, college, or trade school for spouses/caregivers as they assume critical roles in the financial well-being of their Families. hopeforthewarriors.org

Horatio Alger Military Veterans Scholarship: Awarded to Veterans who have served under the United States Military Operation in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan or Operation Iraqi Freedom beginning September 11, 2001, or later. scholarships4students.com/

Housing Scholarship: Provides students with an affordable living option. Recipients will live in a home-like setting where they work in cooperative partnership to purchase and prepare meals and assume responsibility for household tasks. Recipients are responsible for their fair share of household expenses, such as food and utilities. Each student contributes approximately $950 per semester.

Huebner Scholarships: Competitive scholarships for children and grandchildren of former members of the Division as well as children of active-duty 1st Infantry Division Service Members.
**Incentive Scholarship:** Applicant must be a minority who has a minimum 3.5 GPA and minimum combined SAT I score of 1100 (composite ACT score of 26). che.sc.gov/Access Equity

**Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grant:** A student who is not eligible for a Pell Grant but whose parent or guardian was a member of the U.S. Armed Forces and died as a result of service performed in Iraq or Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, may be eligible to receive the Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grant. Enrolled in college at least part-time at the time of the parent’s or guardian’s death.

**Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarship Program:** Administered by the National Military Family Association (NMFA). Fisher House Foundation contributes $100,000 to the NMFA to expand the number of scholarship grants awarded each year

**John A. Keller Scholarship:** Available to dependents of members in good standing of the Chief Warrant Officers Association. scholarships4students.com Additional information: http://www.cwoauscg.org/scholarship.htm

**Jose Marti Scholarship Challenge Grant:** Applicant must be a Hispanic American student who is enrolled for a minimum of 12 credit hours for undergraduate study or nine credit hours for graduate study.

**Keller Law Offices Scholarship for Military Veterans:** Keller Law Offices offers a yearly scholarship up to $1,000 to a military veteran or immediate family member to help him/her receive the training needed for their chosen civilian career. kellerlawoffices.com

**Ladies Auxiliary of the Fleet Reserve Association:** Helping deserving students reach their educational and professional goals for decades, presenting annual awards of up to $5,000 to individuals pursuing college and graduate degrees. la-fra.org
**Law Office Of Matthew L Sharp Annual Military Scholarship:** Assists in the transition back to civilian life for Military members offering a $1,000 scholarship to be used at the vocational or trade school, 2- or 4-year university, or graduate school of your choosing.
mattsharplaw.com

**Liberty University’s Heroes Fund Scholarship:** Provides scholarship assistance for qualifying disabled veterans, Purple Heart recipients, and spouses of veterans killed in action.
liberty.edu/online/heroes

**Marine Corps – Law Enforcement Foundation, Inc.:** Assistance primarily rendered to children of Marines or Federal law enforcement personnel who were killed on duty or died under extraordinary circumstances while serving our country at home or abroad. These funds enable us to provide these children with scholarships for their higher education. When a child of a United States Marine is afflicted with a physical or mental disability and requires special medical equipment or tutoring, our Foundation may grant financial assistance to that Family if their personal insurance does not cover the complete cost of treatment for this child. mclef.org

**Marine Corps League – Scholarship Program:** Over 300 scholarship grants are given annually to applicants. The foundation has started a Blocked Scholarship Fund to build a trust to assist in the funding of its regular scholarship program. Scholarships are applied for and awarded by the Marine Corps League Scholarship Committee using applications and standards developed by that committee. mclfoundation.org/scholarship

**Marine Science Scholarship:** Applicant must demonstrate financial need and academic excellence. Applicants must attend a Northeast Florida institution or reside in the area.

**Military Family Scholarships:** Visit the site to learn about a variety of scholarships and funding opportunities for military families.
Military Officers Association of America Scholarships and Grants: Visit the MOAA Scholarships and Grants site for information on a variety of different scholarships, grants, and interest-free loans.

Military Order of the Purple Heart Scholarship: Available to the recipient of a Purple Heart; a direct descendant of a member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart or of a Veteran killed in action or who died of wounds; or a spouse or widow(er) of a recipient of the Purple Heart.

Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA): Provides up to $4,000 (over 2 years) of Financial Assistance for military spouses who are pursuing degree programs, licenses, or credentials leading to employment in portable career fields.

mycaa.militaryonesource.mil

Military Spouse Fellowship Program for Financial Counseling: FINRA Investor Education Foundation’s 2010 Military Spouse Fellowship gives spouses the training they need to earn the Accredited Financial Counselor (AFC) designation, which gives them marketable job skills and provides them with the knowledge and tools they need to help military families overcome financial challenges.afcpe.org

National Guard Educational Foundation (NGEF): NGEF, DRS Technologies Create College Scholarship For Children of Fallen National Guardsmen: The National Guard Educational Foundation (NGEF) created a college scholarship fund for the children of more than 650 National Guardsmen killed in the war on terrorism. DRS Technologies, Inc. of Parsippany, New Jersey, will provide up to $6,250 per year to selected students attending a 4-year institution or a 2-year program at a community college or technical school.
**DRS Guardian Scholarship Fund**: Open to any high school or college student who is a son or daughter of a Guardsman killed in an operational or training mission in support of operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, or New Dawn. drsfoundation.net/guard

**National Military Family Association (MNMFA) Military Spouse Scholarship Program**: NMFA Awarded only to military ID-carrying Uniformed Services’ spouses (active duty, retiree, Reserve, National Guard, and/or survivor).

**National Military Family Association Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarship Program**: Awarded to spouses of Uniformed Services members (active duty, National Guard and Reserve, retirees, and survivors) to obtain professional certification or to attend postsecondary or graduate school.

**Navy League of the United States**: Currently, the Navy League Foundation has a total of 25 endowed scholarships. Navy League Councils across the United States provide additional scholarships to students and Sea Cadets in their cities and regions.

**Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society Education Programs – NBCC Foundation**: The NBCC Foundation Military Scholarship Program is designed to encourage Service Members and Veterans to pursue careers in professional counseling. The program provides financial support to students who enroll, or seek to enroll, in a CACREP accredited counseling program during or after military service and who commit to serving military personnel.

**NTA Florida Undergraduate Scholarship**: Applicant must be a permanent resident of Florida who is enrolled in an accredited 2- or 4-year college or university in the State of Florida and is entering the second year of a 2-year school, or junior or senior year of undergraduate study in the fall of the calendar year of application.
Online MBA: Since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was introduced, the number of active-duty personnel and veterans using military benefits to pay for education has increased significantly. While this program offers financial relief to military families, there are many additional scholarships available that often go unnoticed. onlinemba.com/resources/financial-aid-and-military-veterans

Online Scholarships: onlinedegrees.com/degree360/student-loans-scholarships.html

Operation Mom: Military Kids provides tangible support to the children of deployed and severely injured National Guard and Military Reserve personnel through grants for sports, fine arts, and tutoring that nurture and sustain the children during the time a parent is away in service to our country. scholarships.com/financial-aid

Paralyzed Veterans of America Scholarship: Paralyzed Veterans’ Educational Scholarship Program was established in 1986 to help members and their immediate families gain postsecondary education from accredited colleges and universities across America. Since the program’s inception, the organization has funded $319,000 in scholarship awards.

Patriot Scholarship: This 10% tuition scholarship is for students enrolling in a new program of study at Divine Mercy University who are eligible veterans, active-duty military, reservists, retired military, and/or spouse/dependents of the same. divinemercy.edu/financial-aid

Patriot Legacy Fund: Provides postsecondary educational scholarships for the dependent children of service-disabled veterans. Scholarships are awarded in the amounts of $2,500 and $5,000 to eligible applicants. patriotlegacyfund.org/scholarships

Pat Tillman Foundation: Individuals eligible for the Leadership Through Action – Tillman Military Scholars program include Veterans and active Service Members of both pre- and post-9/11 service; Service Members who wish to start, finish, or further their education.
Service Members of all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, National Guard, and Reserve); Service Members pursuing undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, 2-year, 4-year, public, private, vocational, and trade degrees or certifications; and dependents of Service Members (children and spouses).

**Posse Veterans Program:** A national college access and leadership program for post-9/11 GI Bill-eligible veterans. Selected Posse Veterans Scholars attend top-tier, selective U.S. colleges/universities in teams of 10 and are guaranteed 4 years of full tuition funding after GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon benefits are applied. Posse Veterans Scholars have access to top internships, career coaches, a diverse professional network, and comprehensive training for leadership positions in the workforce. Current college/university partners: Vassar College (NY), Wesleyan University (CT), the University of Virginia (VA), and the University of Chicago (IL). possefoundation.org/

**Radiology School Scholarship:** Annual Essay contest which provides a $500 scholarship for students studying radiology. myscholarship.app/radiology-scholarship/rules

**Ranger Memorial Foundation Scholarship Fund:** The National Ranger Memorial Foundation, Inc. serves U.S. Army Rangers of all eras through recognition in a granite monument, display of Hall of Fame members, scholarships to deserving individuals, and assisting Ranger Families. rangermemorial.com/forms/scholarship

**Real Work Matters:** This resource for current or future vocational school students helps inform them about the various forms of financial aid that are available to them, like scholarships, grants, or loans for the different circumstances that prospective students may be facing, including aid for part-time students or for students with health conditions. rwm.org
Reserve Aid: Committed to providing financial support to the Families of Reserve Service Members from all services who have been called to active duty and are experiencing financial difficulty. reserveaid.org

Retired Enlisted Association: The Retired Enlisted Association’s (TREA) National Scholarship program. TREA members are proud to be able to offer these scholarships to our Nation’s high school students. The program is open to any high school student.

Rosewood Family Scholarship: Applicant must be a direct descendant of Rosewood Families affected by the incidents of January 1924. Initial Student Florida Financial Aid Application is required for verification. Applicants must not owe a repayment or be in default under any state or federal grant, loan, or scholarship program unless satisfactory arrangements to repay have been made. Tuition and fees up to $4,000.

Scholarships for Children and Spouses of Deceased or Disabled Veterans and Service Members: Provides scholarships for dependent children or un-remarried spouses of Florida Veterans or Service Members who died as a result of service-connected injuries, diseases, or disabilities sustained while on active duty or who have been certified by the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs as having service connected to 100% permanent and total disabilities. CSDDV also provides funds for dependent children whose parent is classified as a prisoner of war or missing in action by the Armed Forces of the United States or as civilian personnel captured while serving with the consent or authorization of the United States Government during wartime service. CSDDV provides funding for tuition and registration fees at an eligible postsecondary institution or the equivalent at an eligible private postsecondary institution in Florida.
Scholarships for Military Children: The Scholarships for Military Children Program was created to recognize the contributions of military families to the readiness of the fighting force and to celebrate the role of the commissary in the military Family community.

Selby Scholarship: Applicants must be a resident of DeSoto, Manatee, or Sarasota County in Florida, have a minimum 3.0 GPA, and be eligible for financial aid.

Society of the Daughters of the United States Army (DUSA): Academic scholarships for college education. dodea.edu/students

Society of the First Infantry Division: For children of Service Members killed in combat or training accidents while serving in a unit assigned or attached to the 1st Infantry Division and authorized to wear the 1st Infantry Division patch. 1std.org/foundation

Special Operations Warrior Foundation College Scholarship: The scholarship program process starts in the 10th grade. specialops.org

Spouse Tuition Assistance Program (STAP): Partial tuition assistance for spouses of Active Duty airmen or officers who accompany members to overseas locations and will be attending college programs. The focus of the program is on the completion of degree or certificate programs that provide increased occupational opportunities for spouses. militarybenefits.info

Tailhook Education Foundation: Must be a high school graduate and the natural, step-, or adopted son, daughter, or grandchild of a current or former Naval Aviator, Naval Flight Officer, or Naval Aircrewman. Also eligible are individuals or children of individuals who are serving or have served on board a U.S. Navy Aircraft Carrier in a ship’s company or the air wing. tailhook.org/Foundation.
Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education Grant (TEACH Grant): TEACH Grant Initial and Subsequent Counseling and a TEACH Grant Agreement to Serve (ATS) so that you may receive one or more TEACH Grants to pay tuition fees. teachats.ed.gov/

TFS Scholarships: Veterans should use scholarship funds like “gap insurance” to pay for any tuition, housing, fees, or books not covered by their benefits. Dependents of veterans may or may not be covered by the benefit programs, making scholarship funds even more important for them. View such Scholarships as the Samsung American Legion Scholarship, Green to Gold Scholarship, Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation Scholarships, and more at usveteransmagazine.com/military-scholarships/tuitionfundingsources.com

That Others May Live Scholarships: Scholarships, family counseling, and aid to surviving children of United States Air Force (USAF) Rescue Heroes who gave the ultimate sacrifice during a Rescue mission, training, or other Personnel Recovery (PR) collateral mission. thatothersmaylive.org/

The Academic Competitiveness Grant: The Academic Competitiveness Grant was made available for the first time for the 2006–2007 school year for first-year college students who graduated from high school after January 1, 2006, and for second-year college students who graduated from high school after January 1, 2005. The AFCEA War Veterans Scholarships are offered to active-duty and honorably discharged U.S. military Veterans (to include Reservists and National Guard personnel) of the Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) or Iraqi Freedom Operations. Candidates must be currently enrolled and attending either a 2-year or 4-year accredited college or university in the United States. Candidates must be majoring in the
following or related fields: electrical, aerospace, systems or computer engineering, computer engineering technology, computer information systems, information systems management, computer science, physics, mathematics, or science or mathematics education.

studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/AcademicGrants.jsp?tab=funding

**The Bonsai Finance Veteran’s Scholarship:** The scholarship celebrates veteran and dependent students who strive for excellence in their lives and provides a one-time payment of $2,500 for current or future education costs.

**The Women’s Army Corps Veterans Association Scholarship established to recognize relatives of Army Service Women:** This scholarship is based upon academic achievement and leadership as expressed through co-curricular activities and community involvement. armywomen.org

**The Fund for Veterans Education:** To help meet the cost associated with higher education for Veterans from all branches of the United States Armed Forces who served in Afghanistan or Iraq since September 11, 2001, and who are now enrolled in college or vocational-technical school.

**The Graduate Incentive Scholarship (GIS) Program:** Provides forgivable loans to “historically underrepresented” students in master’s, first professional, and doctoral programs at public higher education institutions where such programs are offered. The GIS program is implemented annually at the following institutions: Clemson University, University of South Carolina, University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Medical University of South Carolina, College of Charleston, The Citadel, Winthrop University, South Carolina State University, and Francis Marion University.
**Tillman Military Scholarships**: To support educational opportunities for Veteran and active Service Members and their dependents (children and spouses) study-related expenses, such as tuition, fees, and books, as well as other needs, such as room and board and childcare.

**Troops to Teachers**: Enriches the quality of American education by helping to place mature, motivated, experienced, and dedicated personnel in our nation’s classrooms. TTT provides financial assistance, counseling, and employment referral through a network of state TTT Placement Assistance Offices.

**Undergraduate Scholarship Program – CIA**: If you are a high school senior planning to enroll in a 4- or 5-year college program, or you are a college freshman or sophomore enrolled in a 4- or 5-year college program who is looking for career experience in a dynamic environment, apply to the CIA’s Undergraduate Scholar Program and contribute to the work of the nation before you graduate. [www.cia.gov/careers/student-opportunities](http://www.cia.gov/careers/student-opportunities)

**VA Mortgage Center Scholarship**: An ongoing scholarship offer for students with military affiliation, ROTC, and children of military members.

**Veteran Hero Scholarship**: Award: $5,000; Award frequency: One recipient every 6 months. [coursehero.com/scholarships](http://coursehero.com/scholarships)

**Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Scholarship Programs**: The VFW has several scholarship programs across the nation. Visit the site to learn more, or contact your local VFW.

**VFW Military Scholarships**: The VFW’s Military Scholarship program provides 25 $3,000 scholarships annually to VFW members who are currently serving in uniform or have been discharged within the last 36 months.

**VetJobs Scholarships**: Scholarship applications in April and May.
**Wings Over America Scholarship Foundation:** To provide college scholarships to dependent children and spouses of all U.S. Navy—officer and enlisted—active duty, retired, or deceased who served within Naval Air Forces. Recipients are selected on the basis of scholastic merit and community service. wingsoveramerica.us

**WorldWideLearn:** WorldWideLearn offers information on the various forms of financial aid available to students and how their circumstances can affect the type of financial aid that they can apply for. worldwidelearn.com/financial-aid/index.html

**Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program:** This program allows institutions of higher learning (degree-granting institutions) in the United States to voluntarily enter into an agreement with VA to fund tuition expenses that exceed the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition rate. The institution can contribute up to 50% of those expenses, and VA will match the same amount as the institution. gibill.va.gov