2016

Military Students' Persistence in Earning an Online College Degree

Aysel Renay Williams
Walden University

Walden University

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Aysel Renay Williams

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Delmus Williams, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Joanna Karet, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Bonita Wilcox, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2016

Abstract

Military Students' Persistence in Earning an Online College Degree

by

Aysel Renay Williams

MA, Excelsior College, 2009

MS, Robert J. Milano Graduate School, 2005

BS, New School University, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

2016

Abstract

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to gain insight into the factors that military students perceive to have an impact on their persistence. The conceptual framework for this study was Knowles' principles of andragogy. The research questions were designed to explore military students' persistence, measures of engagement in academic activities, decisionmaking to assure success, and the strategies considered important to earn a degree at an online college. Demographic surveys, status reports and degree plans, and semistructured telephone interviews were collected from 13 military students. Interview data were transcribed and all data were open coded and thematically analyzed. Military students experienced longer than desirable time to degree while they managed institutional factors (policies and procedures), situational factors (school, work, and family obligations), and dispositional factors (age and past experiences). Specifically, military students indicated that the following factors contributed to their academic success: (a) military-friendly policies and procedures; (b) balance between school, work, and family; (c) and maturity gained from real-world experiences. They purposefully planned to persist, successfully addressed complex situations, and looked to experts in academia to ensure that those who could impact their progress were keenly aware of military students' diverse needs. Findings were incorporated into a white paper to inform academic leaders on how best to assist military students in completing their online degree programs. Implications for social change are that military students will be better prepared for more career opportunities and help mitigate the financial difficulties and high unemployment rates that disproportionately impact veterans.

Military Students' Persistence in Earning an Online College Degree

by

Aysel Renay Williams

MA, Excelsior College, 2009

MS, Robert J. Milano Graduate School, 2005

BS, New School University, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2016

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family, both immediate and extended members, for without their love and support, completing this doctoral journey would not have been possible. With gratitude, I dedicate this work to the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces who serve and have served our great nation. I especially give my thanks to the military service members and fellow veterans who selflessly volunteered their time to be a part of this study.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my family, friends, and colleagues who encouraged and supported me on this journey. I thank Dr. Delmus Williams, my committee chair and mentor, for his belief in me, meticulous editing, and commitment to my educational goals. I also acknowledge Drs. Joanna Karet and Bonita Wilcox for their suggestions and guidance along the way. I sincerely thank all who inspired me to be persistent in my doctoral degree program.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Military students have a growing presence in online degree programs (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011) and during academic year 2011-2012, an estimated 181,264 (or 16%) of these adult learners attended an academic institution solely online compared to 9% of their nonmilitary peers (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016). In spite of the growth in online degree programs, far too many adult learners do not persist to degree completion (Brown & Gross, 2011). This problem of military students enrolling in colleges and not completing their undergraduate degree programs warrants further research to understand these students' experiences. This study was conducted to develop an understanding of why military students, which included active duty members of the United States (U.S.) Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, Reservists, men and women serving in the National Guard, and veterans who have been released from the U.S. Armed Forces, do not persist to graduation. For the purpose of this study, the term *military student* collectively refers to both present service members and veterans. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the factors that military students perceive to have an impact on their persistence and efforts being made to address needs identified in the institution's strategic plan to encourage students to complete their degrees based on information provided by the students enrolled in online degree programs.

Military tuition assistance (TA) and GI Bill benefits have drawn millions of civilians to the armed forces for nearly seven decades (Routon, 2014). In fact, many men

have indicated that they delayed college enrollment after high school and joined the military to receive money for college (Wang, Elder, & Spence, 2012); servicewomen also use these benefits, however Wang et al. (2012) did not include them in their study because less than 3% of women in the population they studied reported military service. According to the Under Secretary of Defense (2011) and the U.S. Coast Guard (2016), eligible active duty personnel currently receive TA (with limitations, i.e., credit hours and annual caps) for courses taken at regionally or nationally accredited colleges and universities recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Each fiscal year, thousands of service members take advantage of federal TA and veterans' education benefits to pay for their voluntary, off-duty education. This kind of financial assistance for education continually provides an incentive for many men and women to join the armed forces and pursue a higher education.

Military TA programs differ from veterans' education programs. For example, the Department of Defense (DoD) and Coast Guard (under the Department of Homeland Security) pay for undergraduate courses limited to $250 per credit hour (U.S. Coast Guard, 2016; Under Secretary of Defense, 2011). In contrast, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides a variety of educational benefits (e.g., tuition, fees, annual book stipend, and a monthly housing allowance) for eligible veterans plus tuition and fees for service members (Radford et al., 2016). Eligible service members who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001 may qualify for both TA and GI Bill benefits such as those provided under the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill) while on active duty (VA, 2011).

Data drawn from the DoD fiscal year (FY) fact sheets showed that military TA advanced some service members' pursuit of higher education (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support [DANTES], 2011). In FY2002, the DoD fact sheet reflected tuition expenditures totaling $298.9 million to support members who were working toward undergraduate degrees. Additional data showed that 24,286 service members completed undergraduate degrees in FY2002 (DANTES, 2011). A decade later, the FY2011 DoD Voluntary Education Fact Sheet showed that 41,223 service members earned undergraduate degrees while on active duty that year (DANTES, 2012). The FY2011 DoD fact sheet included a breakdown of the total expenditures with $139.74 million being used for traditional classroom courses and $402.28 million spent for online learning courses (DANTES, 2012). These data suggest that the amount of money spent in this program has on average increased by 81% each year for the last decade, and the number of degrees earned has also increased by 70% each year.

The fact sheet figures on completed degrees for military students may look impressive, but further analysis is required to understand what these numbers mean. With college tuition and attrition (voluntary and involuntary withdrawals) on the rise, it is important to know how military students do in terms of *persistence to degree* when using education benefits. Even as the DoD and VA allocated educational funds to colleges and universities, reporting of degree completion rates for service members and veterans has varied with some institutions either under reported these data or did not report it at all (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2013; Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges [SOC], 2012). Empirical data on military

students is needed to inform those who are developing education programs and ensure that benefits are used to the best advantage; otherwise, the DoD and VA cannot guarantee that their investments in service members' and veterans' education yield desired return.

Section 1 begins with a description of military students' persistence followed by a discussion of the problems associated with these adult learners not progressing to degree completion. In the rationale for this study, the problem is addressed at both the local level and in the professional literature. This section also includes definitions associated with the problem, the significance of the problem, guiding/research question, literature review, and implications of the data.

Definition of the Problem

The aim of this qualitative study was to better understand military students' persistence in earning a degree at a nonprofit, online college. To ensure confidentiality, the college will be referred to as Upstate New York College (UNYC) throughout this doctoral study. According to the UNYC website, in 2015, a majority of the students served by UNYC are adult learners who are 25 years of age or older, many of whom enter college many years after earning a high school diploma or acquiring an education equivalency. These nontraditional students, which include both service members and veterans, take advantage of education benefits, open admissions (no entry requirements), and continuous (any time) enrollments to pursue a college degree. However, while military students have access to financial resources to support their education, this subset of the population reportedly experiences one of the lowest persistence rates at UNYC.

As a result, UNYC officials have expressed concern about the educational progress of these military students.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

According to a 2012 UNYC self-study report, the leadership and student success committee members found the initial college-wide persistence rate (60%) to be unacceptable in academic year 2008. This resulted in a newly developed persistence outreach program, with special emphasis placed on at-risk groups like military students aimed at increasing graduation rates college-wide. Based on the self-study report, outreach efforts helped increase the college-wide persistence rate to 67% in FY 2009. Now, college officials reportedly track persistence on a monthly basis to identify students who are on track (persisters), off-track (nonpersisters), and degree complete (graduates). Decision-makers use these data to introduce strategic interventions, initiate outreach actions, and measure the outcomes of persistence outreach programs. Key stakeholders continually strive to guide more military students to finish the programs in which they are enrolled and increase the college's overall persistence rate.

According to the UNYC website, the college enrolled nearly 39,000 students in the spring of 2015. Approximately 40% of those students enrolled in degree programs self-identified themselves as either a service member (30%) or veteran (10%). Some of these matriculated (degree-seeking) students had received individualized degree plans and started online degree programs but stopped short of earning an undergraduate degree at the college. As a result, UNYC is seeking ways to deal with the societal turmoil our

military faces today and offer even greater flexibility to these students as part of its mission of providing a variety of educational opportunities to adult learners, achieving excellence, and developing a caring atmosphere for its students.

Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature

Markle (2015) pointed out that a significant percentage of nontraditional students prematurely leave higher education and may not return to attain a college degree. The longer students stop out of college, the less likely they are to return to earn a college degree. Using data from the DoD in FY 2011, the SOC (2012) working group reported that an estimated 85% of enlisted service members do not have an associate's degree, and about 95% of them do not have a bachelor's degree. Military students' educational attainment remains consistently low and static even though the DoD has invested millions and the VA billions more in higher education. While military students are eligible for substantial amounts of money for college, the aid provided cannot guarantee that those individuals who enter higher education will leave with a college degree (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; SOC, 2012). The SOC (2012) working group and Barry et al. (2014) corroborated findings that showed military funding for education has been an attractive benefit, but financial support has been shown to be only one of the issues related to persistence, and having enough money to pay for college was found not to guarantee degree completion. This lack of degree completion among military students reinforces the conclusion that the investigation of military student persistence to graduation needs to expand to include factors other than financial support.

Definitions

Combat veterans: Combat veterans are persons who served in a theater of combat operations and/or participated in campaigns by air, land, or water that involved combat against a hostile force. Based on this definition, combat veterans refer to those who deployed to a war zone in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and/or other operations and campaigns that involved combat-related missions (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2015).

Military service members: Military service members are individuals who currently serve on active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve components of the U.S. Armed Forces (Barry et al., 2012).

Open enrollment: Open enrollment is a nonselective and noncompetitive admissions process often employed in online colleges and universities. In these institutions, individuals who meet minimum qualifications (e.g., a high school diploma or its equivalent) are automatically admitted to academic programs (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Persistence: Persistence reflects the rate at which students who enter an academic institution remain engaged in their program of study until graduation (Rovai, 2003).

Retention: Retention reflects the rate at which students who enter college remain enrolled from semester to semester (Seidman, 2012).

Veterans: Veterans are former Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard service members who are eligible for and/or have received either TA or U.S. Veterans Administration benefits, or both but are no longer serving in the military (Barry et al., 2012).

Significance

Military students pursue higher education to succeed in the armed forces and in life beyond military service (Persyn & Polson, 2012). Thus, active duty service members and veterans may seek professional development by completing college courses or a college degree at a regionally or nationally accredited postsecondary institution. Both college students and graduates can earn promotion points in the military and qualify for an officer commissioning program (e.g., officer training/candidate school) that bridges the gap between the enlisted and officer ranks (McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, & Perrewé, 2015) and attain a higher socioeconomic status as a result of increased education. Consequently, service men and women often work full-time in the military while pursuing their educational goals (part-time, full-time, or both; DANTES, 2012).

In addition, advanced education is seen as a path to enhanced employment opportunities after discharge from military service. While the knowledge and experience of military students may prepare them for some civilian occupations, this is not always evident to potential employers once the service member leaves active duty and may not be enough to secure meaningful jobs outside of the military. Postsecondary education provides the credentials that can translate those skill sets to civilian employers, particularly since an increasing number of jobs now require a degree, and that trend is likely to continue (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2012).

Military students must earn their educational credentials if they want to compete in the labor market. According to the Current Population Survey of 2012, veterans who served in the armed forces after September 2001 had rates of unemployment of 8.8%

(high school graduate, no college), 10.7% (some college or associate degree), and 6.0% (bachelor's degree or higher), which compared unfavorably to those of their nonveteran counterparts with rates of 8.4%, 7.0%, and 4.0%, respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2013). Veterans who earned some college credits or an associate degree had higher rates of unemployment than their nonveteran counterparts who had completed the same level of education. The lesson here is that, while military students often acquire a cluster of college credits (Brown & Gross, 2011) and learning experiences that might not result in a 4-year college degree (Routon, 2014), these do not necessarily lead to employment after they are discharged and, in fact, are less appreciated than those earned by their contemporaries who are nonveterans.

Looking ahead, Carnevale et al. (2012) anticipated sharp decreases in jobs outside of the military that do not require a college degree. Therefore, low academic persistence or the lack of a degree is potentially significant. This long-term problem must be understood to help identify the specific needs of military students and to develop interventions to address those needs. Otherwise, military students will remain unprepared as a group to take their place in a knowledge based economy, both because they lack the high-level skills required and the educational credentials demanded to compete in this workforce. It will take a community of trained professionals at the DoD, VA, and postsecondary institutions to support military students as they address their educational and career goals (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Guiding/Research Question

The lack of knowledge about and understanding of military student experiences present challenges given that an increasing number of service members and veterans are enrolling in online degree programs and that this student population appears to experience low persistence when seeking undergraduate degrees (Boston et al., 2011). The results of this study may be used as a basis for evaluating current efforts to advance military education and evidence that will support specific solutions that might be developed to encourage and assist military students to persist through degree completion.

The problem explored in this study was why military students stop short of earning an online college degree at UNYC. The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the factors that military students, which included active duty members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, Reservists, men and women serving in the National Guard, and veterans who have been released from the U.S. Armed Forces, perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree. The research questions included one central question and four subquestions, as illustrated, in alignment with the research problem and purpose of this study:

What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree?

RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs?

RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs?

While the topic of military students and course withdrawals has been widely researched, there has been relatively little research published on military students' persistence in earning a college degree online. The guiding questions were used in this basic qualitative study to explore the experiences of military students who enroll in UNYC and earn college degrees online. This research was needed to gain a better understanding of military students' persistence, both because online degree programs help service members and veterans access higher education (Persyn & Polson, 2012) and because of the substantial investment the U.S. government is making in voluntary education programs and in the GI Bill.

Review of the Literature

A review of relevant literature was performed to provide a framework of contextual information on military students and their persistence in online degree programs. The initial review of scholarly books and grey literature informed the adult learning terms, definitions, and theories used in this study. Probing more deeply into the literature helped to find topics on military students and evidence of their persistence in online degree programs. Additional searches were conducted to sketch the academic

context of andragogy, identify current themes about persistence, and examine studies linked to military students in online degree programs.

The literature review begins with andragogy, the conceptual framework supporting this study, followed by three bodies of literature pertinent to understanding persistence and military students' experiences in their undergraduate degree programs. The search of multidisciplinary databases (i.e., Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, and ScienceDirect) and education databases (i.e., ERIC, Education Research Complete, and SAGE Premier) was conducted to locate relevant literature on this research topic. The search criteria included specific terms and various combinations of key terms: *academic persistence, andragogy, adult learning, adult education, career-readiness, combat, core values, deployment, online education, military culture, military education, military history, military learners, military students, motivation, nontraditional students, online learners, persistence, post-9/11 GI Bill, posttraumatic stress disorder, retention, service members, transitions, women service members, women veterans, veterans, veterans benefits,* and *veteran students*. Citations located at the end of selected articles enabled me to use the mapping author technique to locate primary sources of information, which included both scholarly and grey literature on topics relating to persistence. This section concludes with the body of research primarily related to military learners and online degree programs.

Conceptual Framework

Knowles (1970), one of the seminal thinkers in the field of adult learning, offered the concept of andragogy, he defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p.

38) to help us understand the process of teaching and learning of older students. Andragogy was an early attempt to develop and apply a modern practice model that more closely reflected the needs of adults in the classroom. Knowles argued that models used to describe pedagogy focusing on teaching children did not adequately address the needs of adult learners. In his view, adults become increasingly self-directed as they psychologically mature and acquire new knowledge that reflects experiences in real-world situations. Knowledge about teaching and learning had been traditionally derived from studies of animals and children in controlled environments; thus, researchers had neglected to observe adults in their natural learning environments (Knowles, 1973).

Based on these assumptions about adults as learners, Knowles (1973) recommended the application of various theories (e.g., motivational, personality, learning, and transformative) to create human resource development and adult education programs. In his later work, he concluded that concepts related to andragogy and pedagogy applied to both adults and children and the situation in which learning was to occur determined the best approach to be taken (Knowles, 1978). Davenport and Davenport (1985) agreed that applications of andragogy and pedagogy were more dependent upon the situation in which the student found him or herself rather than age. However, these authors questioned whether andragogy should be presented as a theory or just offered as a set of assumptions upon which to base adult learning programs. They also noted that adult education models were continuing to be refined to provide a better framework for enriching adult learning experiences.

In 1989, Knowles revised his model and offered six assumptions about adults as learners. He assumed that, as adults mature, they develop the desire to (a) know the context of their learning, (b) be self-directed, (c) bring prior learning experiences, (d) show readiness to learn, (e) be problem-centered in their orientation to learning, and (f) be driven by intrinsic motivations to learn. As adults mature, they typically take control of their own learning and might look to the teacher as a facilitator rather than one who is all-knowing (Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). Adult learners may be self-directed in familiar learning situations and temporarily dependent in new situations (i.e., as they acquire new knowledge). The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning who encourages adult learners to seek knowledge, participate in discussions, and expand their worldviews (Giannoukos, Besas, Galiropoulos, & Hioctour, 2015). This belief, according to Rovai (2003), "supports the view that online courses should support multiple learning styles" (p. 12). Because the six assumptions about adults as learners do not hold true for all adults in every situation, the best approach to adult learning will depend on situational variables and the needs of the specific learner (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015).

Knowles et al. (2015) were sharply criticized because andragogy focused narrowly on human development and learning activities, but they defended its goals, focusing on humanistic concerns for the growth of the individual learner. Similar to those self-actualizing persons described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, adults come to seek to become independent learners as they mature (Knowles et al., 2015). In a broader sense, this more pragmatic approach relates directly to the experiential learning components of andragogy. Experiential learning occurs when facilitators help students

learn through experience, reflection, and real-life situations and relates directly to human development (humanism) and learner-centered education (pragmatism), shaping how educators apply andragogy in today's educational settings.

Knowles later expanded the andragogy in practice framework to integrate various elements of learning (Knowles et al., 2015). This model encompasses three dimensions: "(1) goals and purposes for learning, (2) individual and situation differences, and (3) andragogy: core adult learning principles …for understanding adult learning situations" (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 79). This 3-D model illustrates a framework in which the first dimension of andragogy in practice goes beyond prescribed functions and fixed conditions to authentic goals and motivations for learning. The second dimension of andragogical practices emphasizes individuality and the learning that occurs in individual scenarios. Lastly, the third dimension links individual goals and motivations to the six principles of adult learning. The andragogy in practice model places adult education into context and illustrates diverse learning opportunities related to a multitude of learners, learning institutions, and real-world situations (Knowles et al., 2015).

The more research evolves in the field of education, the more researchers have come to believe that no single theory, model, or set of assumptions can fully explain adult learning. Through key concepts of adult learning and adult education, a basic qualitative study was used to explore the experiences of military students who matriculated into UNYC and persisted to earn a degree online. The central idea, the military student and persistence, is at the center of a conceptual diagram to illustrate an individual-transactional framework that converges on the learner and different situations. The small

center box describes ability, willingness, and choices, three elements of persistence that are not adequately addressed or fully understood in the literature (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Persistence to degree is further explored in the conceptual framework of the study that was drawn from the work of a variety of authors (see Figure 1).

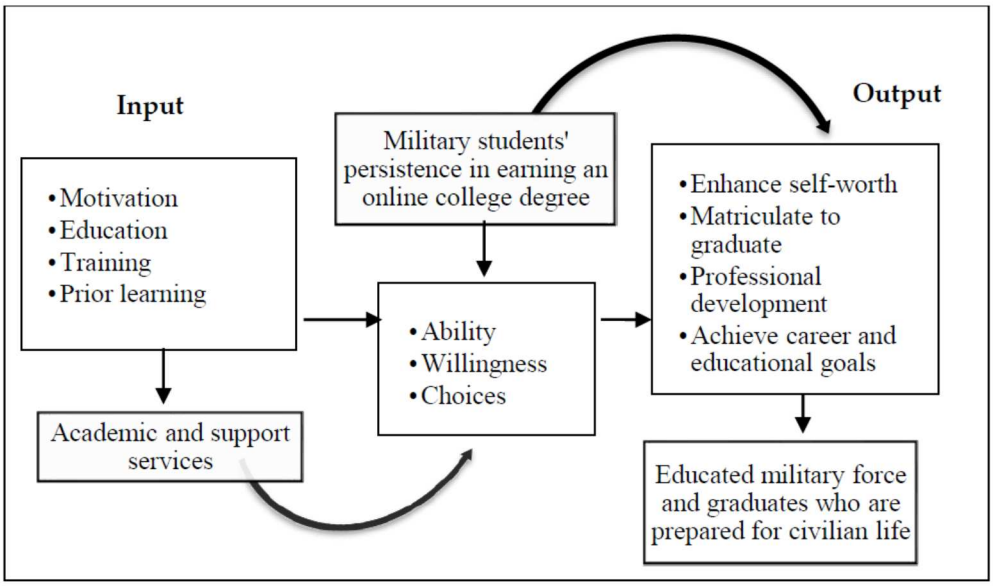


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the study.

Input. The input box on the left of the diagram includes four descriptors that are key concepts of adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015). As discussed earlier, self-actualizers tap into their motivation, education, training, and prior learning experiences to achieve personal growth. At the same time, these learners recognize educators' roles of providing academic and support services, which represent two approaches typically used in higher education to promote student success (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014; O'Herrin, 2011). Adult educators engage learners in suitable activities that foster understanding, involvement, and academic progress (Giannoukos et al., 2015).

Output. The four descriptors in the output box illustrate some of the overlapping goals of military students who enter postsecondary institutions (Persyn & Polson, 2012). Four of many reasons military students choose to pursue a higher education relate to concepts of self-worth, a desire for educational credentials and professional development, and personal goals (Fishback, 2015). Although this is not an exhaustive list, these four descriptors inform how education programs are designed to align with the needs and expectations of goal-oriented adult learners to build human capital (Giannoukos et al., 2015; Mani, 2013).

In summary, andragogy fits within the context of helping adults persist in earning a college degree rather than as the basis for assumptions about military students' experiences as these learners persist (or not) through their programs to degree completion. Military students are capable of being self-directed, bring prior learning experiences, show readiness to learn, are problem-centered in their orientation to learning, and are driven by intrinsic motivations (Fall, Kelly, & Christen, 2011). Additionally, many have honorably served in the U.S. Armed Forces, qualified for military TA and Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, and entered college as degree-seeking students only to leave higher education before they earned their college credentials. The topic of military students and persistence can be explored further using a qualitative approach to develop a better understanding of their situations or how they view their experiences as they pursue their education. Without further research, military students will continue to be underserved and maintain some unmet educational needs similar to the neglected species described by Knowles (1973).

Three bodies of literature were important to address the research questions: (a) research on adult learners and their persistence, (b) research addressing the transition of military service members and veterans to higher education, and (c) research on the military learner and online degree programs. These series of studies are discussed in the following section.

Persistence to a Degree

The first series of articles in the literature focused on persistence to a degree. Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) offered three distinct categories of students based on their education experiences: "students who persist, students who leave but persist elsewhere, and students who leave" (p. 4). These three realities apply to a wide range of student experiences given that students might first select a home college and continue until graduation (Rovai, 2003). In the second group, students might shop around, taking courses at several institutions, try online courses, or finish their degree at an institution other than the first one they enter. The third group starts college, but does not finish and most often gets lost in the data. In this model, students who leave include both students who transfer and those who never complete their degree, though on most campuses, both groups are categorized as nonpersisters or college drop outs (Petty & Thomas, 2014).

Students who persist. According to the 2012 UNYC self-study report, during a 6-month period, persisters are defined as those students who participate in at least one academic activity that contributes to the completion of an online degree program and graduation with the appropriate credential to support their goals. UNYC has developed a unique degree completion model in that students are retained even if they do not enroll in

a new course or take an exam for credit after completing the preceding one. In a 6-month period, persisters in this model are those who earn course credits, pass proficiency exams, transfer in military credits, or engage in any combination of activities defined by UNYC that counts toward degree completion. Persistence then reflects the rate at which students who enter college actively participate in their program of study until graduation (Rovai, 2003).

Students who leave but persist elsewhere. Students who leave an institution may or may not persist elsewhere (Habley et al., 2012). Therefore, the path by which college students complete their degrees can be remarkably complex. For example, students may coenroll in more than one institution, stop out, drop out, have educational goals that do not require graduation from a program, or participate in *swirl*, that is depart from and return to institutions, extending their time to degree, on their way to a college degree. Both traditional students and adult learners are known to take a break (stop out), drop into and transfer out of higher education (swirl), coenroll in two or more institutions (double-dip), and discontinue their education indefinitely (drop out; Schulte, 2015). Students who are close to completing college may persist "as the more time, effort, and money committed to a task (degree attainment), the more likely one is to complete it" (Schulte, 2015, p. 134). Conversely, students may not persist when student swirl leads students to duplicate course work or accumulate credits unrelated to their bachelor's degree requirements, causing disruption in their programs and a longer time to degree (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Even as students drop into another college or university, there is no way to predict that they will graduate from their new institution (Schulte, 2015).

Research has shown that between academic years 2004 and 2009, students transferred a total of 13.6 million college credits from one public institution to another college (Simone, 2014) resulting from either transfer, coenrollment, or swirl. Wang and McCready (2013) and Wang and Wickersham (2014) found that coenrollment in 2- and 4-year college programs had a significant and positive effect on the persistence to graduation, while Johnson and Muse (2012) found less positive results when students swirl in and out of colleges and universities. However, even though student swirl and coenrollment are popular choices among today's college students, there is still only a limited amount of research available about the results of these phenomena and even less in literature on their effects on military students. Researchers have learned that students are entering college, accumulating credits, and perhaps traveling nontraditional pathways to earn their educational credentials. However, the lack of comparable data on different student types makes it difficult to know whether nontraditional students in the military population drop out of college altogether or complete their degrees elsewhere.

Students who leave. The popular press has claimed that an enormous number of military students begin their education but do not finish the programs in which they enroll. Consequently, Callahan and Jarrat (2014) commented on a 2012 news report relating to the student veteran population that reported unsubstantiated data indicating that (a) more than 80% of veterans will fail to remain in college after their first year and (b) only 3% of veterans graduate from college. While these data were alarming, they noted problems with the report, indicating that annual institutional reports only track student progress at their institutions and did not mention the reality that many of these

students migrate from one institution to another (American Council on Education [ACE], 2011). Moreover, the ED frequently used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) that had previously excluded military students, and prior to 2012, the Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) only collected basic data on traditional institutions and their full-time, first-time students (IPEDS, n.d.). Because military students are not adequately tracked, claims about their departure from college might not accurately reflect the experiences of most service members and veterans who leave an institution.

Adding to these complex issues, institutions of higher education sometimes use academic terms (i.e., persistence and retention) interchangeably to describe both student and institutional outcomes (Habley et al., 2012). However, persistence is most often used to describe the behavior of those who remain in school until they finish the program in which they are enrolled (Rovai, 2003) while retention relates to aggregate descriptors (Habley et al., 2012) of those who return to school to take additional courses (Seidman, 2012). While these outcomes are similar, they are not synonyms, and can be confusing if used interchangeably.

Once persisters complete their programs of study, the literature points to three similar academic terms. Graduation, completion, and persistence to degree are interchangeable terms that are "associated with institutions" (Habley et al., 2012, pp. 7-9). In this study, I focus on persistence to degree and draw from research by Rovai (2003) and Habley et al. (2012) and others who showed a clear distinction between both student and institutional outcomes. The inconsistent use of academic terms (persistence,

retention, and graduation) continues to be problematic in that student and institutional data are not systematically collected or reported across academic institutions, and administrators fail to account for the three distinct categories of persisters described by Habley et al. (2012).

Transition Experiences

The second series of studies available are about the transition experiences of military students who gained access to higher education through tuition assistance programs and veterans' educational benefits. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) pointed out that waves of returning veterans have arrived on college campuses as nontraditional students ever since the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly referred to as the GI Bill of Rights) began providing support for their students. However, military students are a unique student population whose experiences in higher education overall are different from those of other nontraditional students and adult learners who have never been affiliated with the U.S. Armed Forces (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Unlike their nonmilitary peers, military students frequently take breaks (stop out) from college for both personal and military-related reasons such as deployments, field exercises, and service training (SOC, 2012). Along with frequent moves, drill periods, mobilizations, and other obligations, military students rarely attend college full-time. Instead, these nontraditional students typically migrate across institutions and accumulate college credits at three or more institutions during their college careers.

In general, military service members and veterans are mature, motivated, and self-directed learners (Lucke & Furtner, 2015). Many of these resilient military students experience both favorable situations and adverse challenges (Bowen & Martin, 2011), endure operational stress (Barry et al., 2012), and remain affiliated with the armed forces (Stanley, Schaldach, Kiyonaga, & Jha, 2011) while pursuing their college degrees. For example, military leaders generally assign multiple duties to service members and reward them for their civilian education, college degrees, physical readiness, and combat experiences. Personal responsibilities inside and outside of the military offer additional challenges for military students and make it more difficult for them to persist to graduation (Barry et al., 2012). However, some institutions fail to track military students, leaving them to self-disclose their military status, go unnoticed in the general student population, or miss out on receiving credits for their military training and experience. The overreliance on the capacity of military students to find their own way through higher education represents a failure to support them in their educational pursuits and leaves them vulnerable to prematurely depart academic institutions before they earn their college degrees (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

However, there is insufficient research on military learners' experiences with persistence to complete their undergraduate degree programs (Boston et al., 2011; Ice, Gibson, Boston, & Becher, 2011). Reviewing the literature, several recent studies focused tightly on combat veterans who served in Afghanistan and/or Iraq (Persky & Oliver, 2011). Combat veterans returned home, transitioned out of the military, and entered institutions of higher education to earn a 2-year college degree. In order to ease

veterans' transition into the community college, Persky and Oliver (2011) found that college officials should streamline military credits in transfer, create veteran-specific programs and services, and train academic professionals to handle veterans' issues or concerns with sensitivity.

Zinger and Cohen (2010) conducted an exploratory qualitative study of 10 veterans in transition from Afghanistan and/or Iraq to a community college. Participants had deployed to a combat zone and experienced problems with readjusting to life and college after their deployment ended. Consequently, some veterans dropped classes because they lacked support and felt disrespected by civilian counterparts and faculty. These disorienting experiences are the complete opposite of the camaraderie and attitudes they were accustomed to in the military. To deal with these issues, colleges and universities must strengthen institutional support structures for veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), better assess student outcomes (Cass & Hammond, 2015), and develop meaningful ways to retain these students in school until they complete their degrees (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012).

Rumann and Hamrick (2010) conducted a phenomenological study and described the lived experiences of service members who deployed to a war zone (Afghanistan, Iraq, or Kuwait) and later reenrolled in a large university after their deployment. These authors reported on six participants who received interventions, felt supported, and remained enrolled in their programs. Student veteran experiences noted in this study ranged from losing access to their student email accounts (minor problem) to reentering college at points that conflicted with academic schedules to increasing their time to

degree completion (major problem). On the other hand, participants in a study conducted by Zinger and Cohen (2010) felt alone on campus and dropped out of undergraduate courses. Not surprisingly, military students who received assistance and felt supported achieved greater academic success (Romero, Riggs, & Ruggero, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) than those who perceived that they lacked support (Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Researchers previously mentioned mostly examined student experiences at a single institution of higher education. In contrast, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) used a grounded theory approach for a multicampus study, finding that most combat veterans had difficulty readjusting to civilian culture and transitioning to an unstructured academic environment. Although the sample sizes in these studies are limited, different student experiences highlight the importance of staffing offices with trained professionals who are prepared to support military students on campus (Kirchner, 2015) and online (Boston et al., 2011). Common themes related to support emerged in the literature. However, as described in the aforementioned scenarios, not all who serve or have served in the military are the same (Vaccaro, 2015), and support services must be personalized to meet the individual student's needs (Rausch, 2014; Vaccaro, 2015). More research is required to better understand the role of persistence in military students' completion (or noncompletion) of an online degree program.

Women's transitions to higher education is another understudied area of academia, especially the experiences of those who are military-connected. Today's women in the U.S. military account for more than 200,000 of the total 1.2 million service

members (DoD, 2016) while women veterans represent an estimated 2.1 million of the 21.9 million veteran population (VA, 2016). Many of these women plan to utilize or apply for the educational benefits they have earned through active duty military service. In spite of national statistics that show women represent a notable percentage of those members in the military, veteran population, and academic institutions, reports on their educational experiences are limited to a few studies.

Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) told the tale of two women veterans. Both women recalled their experiences as a service member, wife, mother, veteran, and student. While on active duty, these women dealt with a broad set of circumstances related to being (a) a dual military couple (i.e., marriage between two service members), (b) separated from their family members, (c) relocated repeatedly, and (d) reunited as a family unit. These women experienced multiple life transitions on top of separating from the military, becoming unemployed, and transitioning into the community college. Similar to other veterans, their military training and service did not translate into college credits. One veteran became a full-time, first-time student and attempted 18 semester credits per term. The other veteran had prior college experiences, swirled in academic institutions, and then became a full-time community college student. These veterans never experienced combat and still felt that their military experiences had helped them to "stay organized and on task" or be "prepared for the challenges of college" (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015, pp. 126-127). Although these two women veterans had very similar backgrounds and military experiences, their educational pathways and needs were vastly different. As student veterans transition from the military to college, they sometimes need help from

family members, academic advisors, or other support systems (Bowen & Martin, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, and Anderson (2015) subsequently compared the help-seeking attitudes of female veterans in college to their male counterparts at seven public institutions. The researchers collected data from Post-9/11 veterans, which consisted of 122 males, 44 females, and one student who did not disclose gender. DiRamio et al. found help-seeking attitudes among women and men veterans to be statistically equal. This finding, according to DiRamio et al., differed from historical accounts of women seeking more help than men, including several sources cited by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011). Since limited studies address issues related to women in the military and their educational experiences, it is important for trained professionals to provide more opportunities for women veterans to share their stories (Demers, 2013; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015) rather than stereotype them and make faulty assumptions about their experiences in the military, college, and civilian world (DiRamio et al., 2015).

Persistence Issues

The third series of studies available in the literature reflected researchers' efforts to address issues related to academic persistence in undergraduate degree programs. There have been a number of studies that asked why nontraditional students withdraw from college in general and online courses in particular, but less attention has been paid to those service members and veterans who persist to graduation. Further, research about persistence has been dominated by studies of nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and adult learners without military experience. As a result, military student

experiences are those that are the least understood within the larger population of college students (ACE, 2011; Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Current research is warranted to understand military students' persistence and the impact of the unique responsibilities they shoulder beyond the college environment.

Military students, in general, receive money for college. However, various military (e.g., service training) and nonmilitary factors impede their progress toward degree completion (Barry et al., 2012). Delayed enrollments, nontraditional educational pathways, and competing priorities are three factors known to threaten adult learners' persistence toward graduation. In spite of that, nontraditional students and adult learners (a) typically delay college enrollment after high school (Wells & Lynch, 2012), (b) select nontraditional education pathways (coenrollment or mixed enrollment; Johnson & Muse, 2012), and (c) attempt to balance school, work, family, or any combination of the three obligations (Holder, 2007). Researchers have shown that military students fit easily within the class of nontraditional students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Reeves, Miller, & Rouse, 2011) and adult learners (McBain et al., 2012). Research on this important student population should contribute to a deeper understanding of military students' experiences with academic persistence in undergraduate degree programs.

Boston et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative study exploring factors that determine continued enrollment at the American Public University System's online universities. American Public University System students completed an average 3.58 courses in academic year 2007, and this rate of course completion will eventually lead to attrition for those students who fail to complete their undergraduate degrees within the

school's 10-year limit. The most significant finding in this study related to the number of students who try online courses and then swirl prior to completing their online degree programs. Boston et al. also found that continuous activity in completing work towards a degree to be a primary factor leading to degree completion and thereby recommended more research to substantiate which factors influenced students to be retained in online degree programs. This study aimed to fill significant gaps in the literature on military students, especially in online degree programs.

McBain et al. (2012) surveyed officials at both public and private degree-granting institutions with military-specific programs. The most common challenges faced by military students at all types of institutions were "finances, retention/degree completion, and social acculturation" (p. 10). Both external factors (finances) and internal factors (social acculturation) can negatively impact students' willingness and ability to stay in college through degree completion. In cases where military students do not receive targeted support and interventions, they might unexpectedly depart institutions of higher education and may not return to earn their degree (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Ellison et al. (2012) used a qualitative needs assessment to examine the perceived educational needs of 31 veterans who self-reported posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The researchers found that these veterans felt a need for supportive education to address their educational and medical needs (Ellison et al., 2012). Some military students transition from combat zones to higher education with both visible (physical disabilities) and invisible (PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and depression) wounds of war (Ellison et al., 2012). These issues, if not addressed, can disrupt or stop military students'

progress toward degree completion (Barry et al., 2012; Ellison et al., 2012). Because these combat veterans often go unnoticed in online education, some of the barriers identified in these studies were found to lead to attrition and to disrupt efforts to obtain degrees.

Durdella and Kim (2012) conducted two quantitative inquiries at a large university to find patterns in veteran students' outcomes and gauge the likelihood that veterans would be as successful as their nonmilitary peers. The authors found that veterans had slightly lower GPAs (3.03) and less of a sense of belonging ($M = 4.96$) than their nonmilitary counterparts (3.11 GPA and $M = 5.04$, respectively). However, veterans' behavioral characteristics, to include high activity and participation, indicated that these students should have achieved higher GPAs. By comparison, Durdella and Kim and others (Maralani, 2011; Roksa & Velez, 2012) suggested that some internal (i.e., self or interpersonal relationships) and external (i.e., financial aid, the quality of their study skills, and support services) factors have enabled adult learners including military learners to persist in certain situations and impeded their academic progress in others. Durdella and Kim concluded that policy makers require research that can help explain why military students' high activity and participation do not correlate with positive outcomes.

In sum, college officials have reported that many military students start online degree programs but then drop out before earning a college degree (Brown & Gross, 2011; Starr-Glass, 2011). This statement is problematic, however, in that it might not accurately describe military students' experiences, especially since some college officials

report that they do not track military students or their movement across institutions of higher education (ACE, 2011; NASPA, 2013). For example, military students who simultaneously enroll in more than one college or university might graduate from one school and not bother to dis-enroll from the others. Students who engage in this behavior appear to the colleges to be nonpersisters, particularly after college officials dis-enroll them for the lack of progress toward degree completion.

Online degree programs offer greater access and flexibility for working adults (Boston et al., 2011). Therefore, one would expect the number of military completers to be higher than previously reported. For various reasons cited in the literature, service members and veterans are underserved and have unmet educational needs. The problem of military students enrolling in online colleges and not completing their undergraduate degree programs warrants further research to understand college experiences that are not adequately addressed by current policies and programs or fully understood in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that military students perceived to have had an impact on their persistence and better understand the impact of contributions being made to address the needs identified in the strategic plan to encourage students to complete their degrees based on information provided by the students enrolled in online degree programs.

Implications

In spite of extensive research on persistence, very few studies have focused on military students and their unique problems within online degree programs. The need to address the needs of this group has far reaching implications in that institutions miss

opportunities to support and serve those among their students who serve and have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Consequently, this study expands knowledge in a developing area in adult education by describing military students' persistence behaviors and the decisions they make that help them complete online degree programs. Without an understanding of military student experiences, institutions are deprived of the guidance needed to intervene in a timely fashion on the behalf of these students. In simple terms, military students must complete their college degree programs to help mitigate unemployment rates, financial difficulties, and homelessness problems that disproportionately impact veterans.

The results of this study will be shared with college officials to help them better understand military students' experiences in their degree programs and how those experiences impact their persistence in earning an online college degree. These results could also be used to evaluate existing programs and develop new ones by guiding efforts of the college to align student support services with the needs of military students. The report to officials at the host college will also include recommendations for the improvement and expansion of services for veterans and service members studying there.

Summary

Despite increased enrollments in online degree programs, a disproportionate number of military students do not graduate from college. Persistence to degree is problematic for many military service members and veterans. While the DoD and VA have collectively invested billions of dollars in military students' education, having enough money to pay for college does not guarantee degree completion. Some internal

and external factors have been found to encourage military learners to persist in certain situations and stopped their academic progress in others. At the same time, inadequate tracking and reporting practices make it difficult to establish accurate data on college degrees earned by military students. This topic requires further research to better understand how military students' experiences impact their persistence to graduation in online degree programs.

Knowles (1973) broadened the concept of andragogy, which offered a better framework for considering adults as learners. This concept has since evolved into a fuller adult education model and a basis for developing learning experiences. Motivation, education, training, and prior learning remain core concepts of adult learning and adult education. Three bodies of literature framed this research with descriptions of military students' transitions, persistence, and nonpersistence in online degree programs. The next section includes a description of the methods used in this study that addressed why some military students persist in academic programs and others do not.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

Section 2 includes a description of the research design, the participants, methods of data collection, and the analysis used to identify and understand the factors that military students perceive to have an impact on their persistence in earning an online degree at UNYC. In this section, a restatement of the purpose of the study is followed by details on gaining access to the participants, ethical considerations, and the researcher's role. Section 2 concludes with a report of the findings.

Research Design

Basic qualitative research is a suitable design that researchers use to "focus on meaning and understanding" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). In doing so, basic qualitative researchers follow emergent designs to holistically describe and understand experiences that do not yield fully developed causal explanations or solve problems (Litchman, 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that researchers using this method employ inductive, qualitative research to better understand a central phenomenon from the individual's perspective. In this study, I employed a basic qualitative approach to examine military students' perceptions of their experience while working towards a degree at UNYC. The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the factors that military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree. The research questions included one central question and four subquestions to help address the problem and purpose of this study:

What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree?

RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs?

RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs?

The central research question was answered by exploring factors that military students perceive to have an impact on their persistence in earning a degree at UNYC.

Qualitative researchers explore how individuals make sense of a phenomenon or situation that has not previously been widely and/or successfully treated. The extensive search of academic research databases (e.g., EBSCO, ERIC, and JSTOR) revealed significant gaps in the literature regarding online degree programs, especially of studies using a sample of military students that addressed their persistence toward graduation. There was a need for an exploratory inquiry to better understand the unique situation within which military students pursue degrees and the way they measured their ability and willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college. Understanding and appreciating student perspectives of their educational experiences and learning how they navigate experiences and persist in

their programs will allow decision-makers to focus on these students' needs as they seek to design programs to meet their needs.

The basic qualitative approach used shares characteristics with other qualitative methodologies such as (a) phenomenology (seeks to understand the essence of experiences), (b) ethnography (describes cultural patterns), (c) grounded theory (builds theory), (d) case studies (explore a specific person, program, and activity), and (e) narrative research (examines retold stories) defined in the corresponding parentheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the distinguishing features of these five qualitative methodologies did not fit the purpose of this study or appropriately address the questions answered. As a result, basic qualitative research methods were chosen for the study because they are flexible, allowing the research problem to be explored through multiple methods rather than focusing on the essence of experiences, culture, new theory, bounded system, or story about a phenomenon (Flick, 2014; Litchman, 2013).

In contrast, Pascarella, Salisbury, and Blaich (2011) and others have conducted quantitative research to collect numerical data and test hypotheses. Although quantitative research adds value in testing theoretical models of attrition/persistence (Pascarella et al., 2011; Tinto, 1975) and predicting persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the numbers generated do not always capture the richness of participants' experiences and can only provide a superficial understanding of what has and has not happened to date. As an alternative, qualitative research provides a way to give voice to students in specific situations (Litchman, 2013), uncover the richness of their college experiences, and produce descriptive data that can paint a fuller picture of more complex issues, though

within a narrower scope (Sallee & Flood, 2012). This more nuanced approach is more valuable when considering persistence at this institution, the efforts of military students within online degree programs at UNYC, and specific ways programs can be improved at this institution.

In this qualitative study, I focused on military students' perceptions of factors that impact or have impacted their persistence in earning a degree at an online college. The following subsection describes the criteria for selecting participants, justification for the number of participants, procedures for gaining access, and the researcher-participant working relationship.

Participants

Selection of Participants

Criterion sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, was chosen to identify and select a group of individuals who met the inclusion criteria established to answer the research questions asked. The criteria used required participants to be adult learners who had (a) self-reported a military/veteran status on their enrollment application, (b) selected a U.S. military branch of the service, (c) attained good academic standing, and (d) persisted to their senior year of study. The predetermined criteria were important to collect information-rich data from key informants who could describe their own progress toward degree completion and provide meaningful contributions relating to this research topic. The population chosen brought multiple perspectives to the study from individuals who described and interpreted their own efforts and those of their colleagues.

The local setting for this research study was an online college located in the northeast region of the United States. A query of the site's student information system identified 60 men and women who met the inclusion criteria, and the participants received an invitation by email to ask that they agree to participate in the study. Of the 13 military students who voluntarily consented to participate in this study, 77% were men (n = 10) and 23% were women (n = 3). Their ages ranged from 25 to 60 years. Demographic information extracted from the student information system showed that participants described themselves as white (n = 8), Hispanic/Latino (n = 3), and black/African American (n = 2). Participants served in the Air National Guard, Army, Marine Corps, or Navy, with 77% being active service members (on active duty or in the reserves or National Guard) and 23% being veterans who held various ranks in the military and had completed between 5 and 30 years of service. Finally, all participants reportedly matched at least one nontraditional student characteristic as broadly defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. Specifically, participants either reported delayed college enrollment, part-time college attendance, full-time employment, financial independence, and/or parenthood (NCES, 2015).

Justification for the Number of Participants

Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) stressed the importance of justifying the sample size and its impact on data saturation (redundancy) in qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers, in general, focus on small sample sizes to collect rich descriptions of real world experiences from participants (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). However, Creswell (2013) suggested that there is no definitive answer as to how

many samples are enough. Instead, he has taken the position that the qualitative design that is used (e.g., case study, narrative, phenomenology) might consist of 10 or fewer participants. The anticipated sample size for this study was 10 to 15 participants (13 actually participated), a sample size similar to that used in earlier qualitative studies designed to collect rich data and gain a better understanding of the central phenomenon from individuals' perspectives (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Data saturation was not achieved until interviews had been conducted with 13 military students, all of whom fit the criteria previously noted and agreed to participate in this study. The cumulative data relating to participants' experiences presented the kind of rich description required for this study.

Procedures for Gaining Access

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted conditional approval to begin this study on February 13, 2015 (approval #: 02-13-15-0240859). Next, a project review application was submitted to the IRB at UNYC. The application included a letter of cooperation from the site's operation staff member (gatekeeper) who authorized access to military students as study participants. According to the UNYC website, researchers may request an expedited review (Category I) or full review (Category II) of projects. The application was for an expedited review based on two criteria listed under Category I. First, this research involved no more than minimal risk to participants. Secondly, adult learners were interviewed on nonsensitive topics, and pseudonyms were used to assure confidentiality. UNYC officials do not require researchers to submit the volunteer agreement and informed consent pages in expedited

review requests. The site's IRB approval was granted (approval No. 2015-05) followed by the full permission of the Walden IRB to begin data collection.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

Taylor et al. (2015) indicated that qualitative researchers maintain the role of a data collection instrument to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon or events under investigation. In this role, the researcher may interview the participants, collect the documentary evidence, transcribe the interviews, and analyze all of the collected data. Because of my military background and varied roles I have played in online education, I am uniquely positioned to understand the culture, educational experiences, and behaviors of those military students. Yet I remained sensitive to deeply embedded cultures that exist inside and outside of the military. It is possible that some service members and veterans perceived me as an insider (belonging) and others as an outsider (not belonging). As a result, I very respectfully approached the interview process and attempted to establish rapport with participants who volunteered to be a part of this study. In order to avoid overfamiliarity, my former students were excluded from this study. I typically have tried to form relationships with military students in my work based on mutual respect and trust, and this, more often than not, enhances their willingness to speak frankly with me, making it easier to successfully gather data.

Ethical Protection of Participants

Prior to collecting data, the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research web-based training course on protecting human research participants was completed to ensure that appropriate consideration was given to protecting the

participating students and their rights. The training date of completion was 02/12/2014. The certification number for the training is 1400999 (see Appendix F). Data collection began after UNYC and Walden granted approval to collect data.

Participants selected a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality. This process proved to be problematic as two participants revealed that they had chosen their real middle name as a pseudonym. Alternative pseudonyms were assigned to these participants. The third participant, Jayson, selected an appropriate pseudonym and it is used in this study. In subsequent cases, a name age calculator was used to generate names (i.e., pseudonyms) that related to the participants' ages and gender. Ashley, Bryan, Charles, David, Emanuel, Fernando, Gregory, Henry, Ingrid, Jayson, Keisha, Luke, and Matthew are the pseudonyms assigned to the total 13 participants. The participants verbally agreed to participate in this study and were asked to print or save the informed consent form (see Appendix C) for their records.

All interview data and academic documents are stored in a locked desk file cabinet to protect the identity of participants. I maintain all the keys and have exclusive access and the pass codes for data that are stored on a universal serial bus flash drive, personal computer, and the audio recorder. Direct quotes give voice to the participants, but assigned pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality in the data. Participants had the option to end the interview at any time, if they wished to do so, but none did. Although personal identifiers were removed from data sources prior to the peer review, the reviewer signed a confidentiality agreement to protect participants' rights.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative studies may include both primary and secondary methods of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One primary method of data collection, interviews or participant observations, combined with a document analysis, a secondary method, can help validate the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) or help uncover a deeper understanding of the problem (Taylor et al., 2015). Participant observations for this study were rejected because students are geographically separated from the online college, and persistence is a complex phenomenon that cannot be directly observed. Instead, the primary source for data collection consisted of semistructured interviews, supplemented by document analyses of academic records to extract meaning from audio and text data.

In preparation for the data collection, a faculty program director, adjunct faculty member, and military field consultant reviewed the interview guide to be used in gathering data. These individuals have expert knowledge about the research topic and experience helping military students complete their online degree programs. They agreed to evaluate the appropriateness of the interview questions, the focus of each question in relation to the study, and the structure of the interview guide. None of these scholars were asked to answer the questions on the interview guide; therefore, they did not participate in the semistructured interviews or provide data for this final study. Instead, all three experts accepted the invite to review the interview questions and comment on the questions. Suggestions were made to refine the interview guide and changes were

made to reflect their insights. The result was the interview guide that is attached as Appendix D.

Interviews

Researchers enter the world of others through qualitative interviews and the use of probing questions to extract information-rich and meaning-making data (Taylor et al., 2015). Following Brinkmann's and Kvale's (2015) recommendation for research interviews, Kvale's seven step process was used to

1. Develop the interview theme, military students' persistence, which was constructed of the research question,
2. Design semistructured interview questions (see Appendix D),
3. Interview participants,
4. Transcribe the interview data,
5. Analyze the interview data,
6. Validate the findings, and
7. Report the findings.

One-on-one interviews were planned to last between 45 to 60 minutes each, but the interviews generally took less time than that. Because specific areas needed to be covered in a limited amount of time, the semistructured interview was a suitable method to ask predetermined and open-ended questions to remain focused on the topic (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

At the beginning of each interview, participants asked questions, listened to a synopsis of the interview process, and answered whether or not they would permit a tape

recording of the interview. All participants verbally agreed. Once the verbal consent was given, a brief pause was announced to connect the telephone call to the audio recorder. The interview began with a reiteration of the verbal consent to document that consent had been given. The interview guide (see Appendix D) consisted of common questions to ensure that reasonable comparisons between responses could be made (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), and additional questions were asked when useful to expand on the answers given when appropriate. Open-ended questions (e.g., what and how) guided participants through the interview process.

Glesne (2011) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) recommended probing techniques such as the silent probe, echo probe, uh-huh probe, and "tell me more" probe to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. Probing techniques involved attentive listening (silence), repeated responses (echo), acknowledged comments (uh-huh), and asked clarifying questions or made statements (tell me more) to better understand the meaning military students ascribed to their experiences. For example, participants were asked, "Can you give an example?" "Then what happened?" or were encouraged to "Describe what you mean" at appropriate times. Brief notes were hand-written during the interviews, and, shortly after finishing these conversations, the audio recordings were played back to listen, transcribe data, and enter transcripts into a restricted database. These techniques provided reflective opportunities to re-examine participants' responses and minimize misinformation. Interviews concluded with final thoughts and a statement of appreciation for participants' time. By the end of the 13 one-

on-one interviews, participants had on average answered topical and probing questions within a 35-minute timeframe.

Interviewing a large number of participants was not feasible, especially considering the time limitations for this project study and the detailed nature of responses offered in these qualitative interviews. Unlike quantitative researchers who seek to generalize the results to larger populations, there were no broad claims made about the generalizability of the findings in this study. The immediate purpose of this study was to advise decision-makers at UNYC. However, the study produced insights that can be drawn upon by other institutions if considered within the local framework existing on those campuses or within their online environments. So, the results may be distributed more widely, inviting readers to apply the findings beyond the immediate context of this study as they deem appropriate and to encourage similar studies elsewhere.

Document Analysis

Qualitative researchers systematically organize and explore qualitative data to identify patterns or emergent themes in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This non-linear and iterative process, according to Merriam and Tisdell, involves sorting information by hand, computer programs, or both to store, manage, and analyze data. Atlas.ti trial version 7, a computer software program, and Microsoft programs aided in the storage of data. By the end of the data collection phase, the collected data included 13 interview transcripts and 26 academic documents. Emerging understandings were entered in the margin-area of Atlas.ti project and in a reflective journal to capture the way

military students framed important moments in their academic careers and factors they perceived to have had an impact on their persistence to degree completion.

Twenty-six academic documents were closely examined to identify emerging patterns across the interviews and document analysis. The specific documents were participants' status reports and degree plans. Both pre-existing documents, defined in the 2012 UNYC self-study report, showed students' progress toward completing their online degree programs. For example, the 13 status reports included credits earned from (a) other colleges/universities, (b) military training and occupations, (c) foreign languages, (d) proficiency exams, and (e) UNYC. On the other hand, the 13 degree plans or degree audits confirmed the way earned credits applied toward a student's degree program in addition to the type and number of credits a student needed to graduate. The document analysis and interviews were needed to better understand military students' persistence in earning a degree at the online college. Findings about participants' experiences and persistence are discussed at the end of Section 2.

Both primary and secondary sources for data collection were used to simultaneously collect and analyze data, which illuminated military students' experiences as they persisted in earning a degree at the online college. The simultaneous collection and analysis of data is a procedure used to gain familiarity, and while reviewing both interview and document data, researchers achieve a more complete understanding of the meaning that participants ascribe to their educational experiences. The 13 interviews and 26 academic documents yielded ample information to complete this research. Memoing was a way to keep track of data and record emerging thoughts about the specific steps

chosen to achieve data saturation and to overcome the challenges of low responses. Details about the researcher's roles appear in both interviews and document analysis subsections and describe how these two data collection methods were used in this study.

The procedures for gaining access to participants consisted a multi-layered strategy. Once Walden granted approval to collect data, a sample of students who met the four criteria required to participate in this research study was requested and received from the reporting director at UNYC. Twenty potential participants received an email along with an information sheet to help them decide whether they wished to take part in this study. Approximately five days after receiving an email invite, three prospective participants expressed interest to participate in this study. The potential participants agreed to a preliminary telephone interview and supplied demographic information (see Appendix B) to help establish their suitability for this study. During the preliminary interviews, prospective participants received information that consisted of

1. The researcher's background,
2. Procedures for the study (voluntary participation, risks and benefits, and confidentiality),
3. Points of contact for the researcher, faculty advisor, and Walden IRB, and
4. The statement of consent.

One-on-one telephone interviews began with three participants to start the data collection process. This cycle was repeated three times by sending a total of 60 email invitations which yielded 13 participants who consented to participate in this study. Data collection occurred during a 4-week period between March and April 2015.

Researcher Role

I am a senior academic advisor and adjunct faculty member. Both roles are unique in that adult learners trust me to help them develop degree completion plans and identify success strategies for online learning. I transitioned into these roles after 20 years in the military, and one of my top professional priorities continues to be exploring ways to help service members and other veterans achieve their educational goals. Consequently, my interest in education for military personnel has been inspired by my own experiences as a military student, adult learner, and facilitator of an online success strategy course for service members and veterans. Employment at an online college challenges me to open my mind to diverse styles of academic advising and degree planning for military students and other adult learners and offers me a great opportunity to continue the military tradition of leading by example, facilitating learning, and helping adult learners address their educational and career goals. These life experiences and learned commitments shaped my perception of the research topic, and led me to consciously acknowledge and record my personal views in a reflective journal (see Appendix E).

Based on the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism, researchers are guided by the assumption that multiple realities exist by the importance of understanding the meaning participants assign to their individual experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Although I am familiar with military education, only a qualitative study could provide the deeper understanding required to understand military students' perception of their experiences and the impact of those experiences on academic persistence at UNYC. I

maintained the role of a data collection instrument to better understand military students' persistence in earning a bachelor's degree at the online college under study.

Data Analysis

Introduction

Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis, as a widely used research tool designed for use across different methods. The thematic analysis offers flexibility and freedom from a specific theoretical framework and guides the researcher to analyze themes in six phases. Braun and Clarke instructed researchers to (a) become familiar with their data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) sort for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) produce the report (pp. 16-23). Although Braun and Clarke presented step-by-step procedures, thematic analysis is a "recursive process, where [researchers] move back and forth as needed, throughout the phases" (p. 16). This chosen technique resulted in the analysis of multiple interview transcripts and academic documents to cross-check validating data rather than analyze the interview transcripts and document data independently.

Interviews

Following the six phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), researchers immerse themselves in the data to become very familiar with it. The data analysis involved repetitious cycles of listening, transcribing, reading, and editing the interview transcripts to assure accuracy. Hand analysis can be a time-consuming task; therefore the Atlas.ti trial version 7 and Microsoft programs proved useful to store and analyze data. After loading the first two audiotaped interviews into an Atlas.ti

project, multiple phases of listening occurred until data could be transcribed verbatim. These procedures consisted of reading the transcripts, electronically highlighting key words, and using the Atlas.ti query tool to retrieve data segments where students described their academic persistence and what they thought of those experiences.

The trial version 7 of Atlas.ti, however, imposes some limitations in that users can only load 10 primary documents, 100 quotations, 50 codes, and other restrictions in a single project. After two transcriptions and document reviews, 55 initial codes had been generated during the open coding process. The single project exceeded the limit of total primary documents, quotations, and codes permitted in the trial version. To overcome these limitations at no cost, the 13 interview transcripts needed to be combined into a single document. The transcripts were loaded into a single MS Word table and organized in alphabetical order by the participants' pseudonyms. Using the text highlight color function, the second phase began by marking key words and phrases, exploring patterns, and color coding similar categories. Participants used common terms or themes that described persistence (i.e., perseverance, stubbornness, purpose, determination, continuance, and others). Becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and sorting for themes produced 501 initial codes, which included utterances labeled under general headings and responses that were important to answer the research questions.

During the next three phases, data-driven themes were found to answer the central research question and four secondary questions (see Table 1). For example, concepts of time encapsulated academic terms, clock hours, operational tempo, and multiple stages of

persistence. Revisiting the themes grounded in the data led to some of the factors associated with participants' ability and willingness to persist until graduation.

Table 1

Research Questions and Theme Table

Central Question: What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree?

	Time	Commitment	Self-efficacy	Determination	Military culture
RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?	✓		✓		✓
RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs?	✓	✓		✓	
RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

In phase three, the sorted themes had the following color codes: (a) blue for participants' responses related to multiple concepts of time, (b) green for comments about participants' devotion to duty, personal obligation, and stubbornness, (c) yellow for participants' beliefs about their accomplishments, (d) grey for strong-mindedness,

willpower, and self-discipline, and (e) purple for references to military training, occupations, and core values. Sorting consisted of emergent themes, a review of these themes, and the analysis of meaning units to build relationships to the research questions.

Through a thematic analysis, researchers systematically analyze data, identify patterns, and develop data-driven themes. The thematic analysis conducted in this study provided an understanding of what and how individuals understood a particular phenomenon or situations (the story line) they encountered. Tufford and Newman (2012) and Chenail (2011) suggested the use of a reflective journal to maintain a degree of neutrality and allow participants' interpretations to shape the findings (see Appendix E). The data analysis process provided a systematic way to understand patterns linked to data-driven themes in the responses received that will be discussed more fully in the Findings section.

Documents

The thematic analysis offered the same flexibility in the analysis of the students' status reports and degree plans. Repeating the six phases recommended by Braun and Clark (2006), an in-depth analysis of 13 status reports and 13 degree plans was completed. Data were extracted from the status reports and degree plans were entered the information into Microsoft Excel. Marginal note columns were useful to record any initial impressions about repeated patterns of persistence, and verify the total credits participants needed to earn a bachelor's degree at the online college.

The thematic analysis of the status reports and degree plans gave meaning to the story that was embedded in the academic documents: (a) time to degree, (b) persistence,

(c) proficiency, (d) independent learning, and (e) military culture. This inductive process was used to identify patterns and to connect key words and phrases to meaning units. Concepts of time connected to the way participants measured their persistence, made decisions, and planned to complete their bachelor's degree programs. All participants spoke of time, commitment, and self-efficacy in some context. Combined, the interview data and academic documents painted a fuller picture of emergent patterns and one dataset corroborated the other. The resulting thematic analysis captured the richness of military students' persistence to degree completion and evolved into the three overarching themes that are discussed in the Findings section.

Validation Strategies

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) listed eight strategies that enhance rigor and trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Validation strategies require "careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented" (p. 238). Five of those strategies implemented in this study are (a) triangulation, (b) adequate engagement in data collection, (c) researcher's position or reflexivity, (d) peer review/examination, and (e) rich, thick descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). The validation strategies employed in this study are discussed.

Triangulation. To capture different measures of persistence, triangulation occurred across data collection methods and multiple sources of data. Triangulation methods included demographic surveys (see Appendix B), interviews, and academic documents. Prospective participants answered demographic questions to confirm their

eligibility to participate in this study. Eligible participants consisted of veterans, active duty service members, Reservists, and personnel in the National Guard who provided multiple sources of information. These sources of data offered reasonable explanations about a wide range of education experiences and helped to gain a better understanding of some factors that have an impact on military students' persistence as they strive to complete an online college degree. Because the surveys, interviews, and academic documents are different forms of data, it is logical to find that the triangulation of methods and data sources "may not lead to a single, totally consistent picture" (Patton, 2015, p. 662). According to Patton, inconsistent results or interpretations should be viewed as an opportunity for a richer understanding that links the qualitative inquiry to the phenomenon under study. The findings in the next section showed multiple perspectives constructed by the participants in addition to a discrepant case, which illustrated a detailed portrait of military students' persistence in earning a degree at the online college.

Adequate engagement in data collection. In March 2015, the first list of potential participants consisted of 20 individuals. Email invitations and the information sheet were sent to ask them whether they would be willing to participate in this study. Three military students expressed interest and moved forward with the preliminary interviews. All eligible participants consented to participate in the one-on-one semistructured interviews, and agreed to have a copy of their status report and degree plan provided to the researcher.

In between the preliminary and semistructured interviews, another set of 20 potential participants received an email invitation. In all, 40 participants were invited to participate. Reflecting on this experience, the challenges of getting potential participants to reply to the email invitations were well noted. After waiting five days and receiving low response rates, the next step was to make follow-up telephone calls to the second group of potential participants. This outreach resulted in 17 preliminary interviews. Out of those 17, six individuals consented; two consented but later withdrew; seven declined out right; and two were deemed ineligible because of a pre-existing advisor/student relationship. Although contact was established with six military students in wave 2, only three potential participants followed through and kept their appointments for the semistructured interviews. In reflection, alternative strategies were considered.

A third wave of invitations was sent to another group of 20 potential participants. The 5-day waiting period was reduced during the third wave of samples. After three days elapsed, prospective participants received a follow up telephone call. The third wave of invitations generated seven more people who agreed to be interviewed. Because data saturation occurred at this point, there was not a need to request a fourth request for participation. At a quick glance, Table 2 illustrates the number of invitations that were emailed to potential participants and the total number of qualified respondents who agreed to participate:

Table 2

Waves of Interview Samples

	# of invitees	# of qualified respondents
Wave 1	20	3
Wave 2	20	3
Wave 3	20	7
Totals	60	13

A total of 13 semistructured interviews were completed by the end of April 2015.

Research reflexivity. Memoing and field tests provide ample opportunities for researchers to reflect on their experiences in designing an instrument for a study. In reflection, an initial source of confusion originated from an attempt to try and understand the differences between a pilot interview, pilot test, and pre-test of the instrument. These qualitative approaches involved testing the interview questions by interviewing people who are close to the population under study (Creswell, 2013; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In contrast, the plan for this study was to identify any weaknesses in the interview guide prior to collecting data from the actual participants. Understanding of the purpose of the different tests and the type of participants needed, led to three scholars who consented to participate in a field test of the instrument. These three individuals offered their expert advice, which led to the redesigned interview guide. Reflexivity was important to consider alternative strategies, understand the purpose of field tests, and use appropriate methods to answer the research questions.

Peer review/examination. One peer reviewed the research methods for this qualitative study. This peer reviewer had earned a PhD in Psychology at an online

university, is familiar with the topic under study, and is a military veteran and former academic advisor to military students. The peer reviewer provided written and verbal feedback on the methodology, informed the development of consent request documents, data destruction, and the interview guide used. Similar themes emerged from the peer reviewer's analysis of the interview transcripts (devoid of identifying information) and depicted thick, rich descriptions of students' experiences.

Rich, thick descriptions. Rich and thick details allow readers to gain a profound understanding of how military students experience persistence in their online degree programs. While maintaining confidentiality, this study included a description of each participant, the local setting, and procedures employed to capture the students' interpretations of their educational experiences. Evidence of these elements are shown in reflexivity, the demographic information, direct quotes from the interviewees, and the analysis of two academic documents. For example, the demographic characteristics of the 13 participants indicate that they were diverse in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, branch of service, military status, rank, years of service, and academic experiences. The study represents efforts as a researcher to provide vivid details of how and why military students persisted in their online degree programs. By applying rich and thick descriptions, readers can determine whether the findings may be applied outside of this college in similar settings (Creswell, 2013).

Discrepant Cases

While the five color coded themes formed a pattern, discrepant information ran "counter to the themes" or did not fit into any distinct category (Creswell, 2013, p. 202).

Those codes were labeled “miscellaneous” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 20). One particular case came from the one-on-one interview with Participant 5 (Bryan); he shared three comments about self-discipline as a habit persisters acquire to succeed in the online environment that added to nuance to the discussion. First, Bryan presented an alternative perspective of online learning to emphasize the fact that students are not face-to-face with someone who is going to say they are disappointed in the student. Second, he noted that no physical being is there to tell students the things they should have done. And third, that, in this environment, no one is physically there to ask, “What’s your excuse?” Even as Bryan has interacted with his peers in the online environment and reached out to his online instructors, he described student and faculty interactions as “very impersonal.” It is Bryan’s position that interactions with “an instructor or a student body” will be “disconnected anyway” because the online environment is limiting (e.g., his comment that “there is only so much a person can do online”). Therefore, Bryan believed that self-discipline was the key to persistence in the absence of social structures like “public shame, or competition, or other things” being that students could not see each other’s grades posted on a wall.

Bryan also felt that the kinds of camaraderie, competition, social stigma, and humiliation found in a brick and mortar community college or university did not exist in the online environment. This conversation with him prompted a return to the literature and it was noted that military students, in general, describe favorable traits (self-discipline) that often lead to persistence and unfavorable situations (disconnections) known to threaten persistence (Holder, 2007). After revisiting the three themes that

emerged in the data analysis, there was not a better fit for Bryan's contribution. The case study is a recommendation for further analysis to determine whether college officials should be interested in learning more about this discrepant data.

The next section includes a discussion of the findings relating to military students' persistence at UNYC.

Findings

In this qualitative study, the findings were derived from a set of semistructured interviews and document analyses. Situated in Rovai's (2003) framework of persistence, military students who were interviewed in this study detailed multiple aspects of their ability and willingness to continue their education until graduation. The sample included seven active full-time military service members, three veterans, two Reservists, and one Air National Guardsman. The 13 participants were interviewed to give voice to military students who best described some factors that impact their persistence, and their intent to continue academic activities in spite of obstacles (Rovai, 2003). The status reports and degree plans that were analyzed in the spring of 2015 showed that all students persisted to their senior year of study and three of the students graduated in that term. Three themes emerged in the data: (a) Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, (b) Determination to Accomplish Missions, and (c) The Call for Military Culture Awareness. The next subsection describes the themes that were used to refine the understanding of military students' persistence in earning an undergraduate degree at this online college.

Theme 1: Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy

The first theme, Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, emerged in the analysis of the interview data and consisted of consideration of the time military students devote to their academic pursuits. These students were 4 to 38 years away from initial entry in college at their first academic institution, but described themselves as "stubborn," "dedicated," "single-minded," "focused," "determined," and driven by a higher purpose to earn a bachelor's degree.

Three graduates, David, Matthew, and Luke persisted to earn a bachelor's degree in the spring of 2015. However, their educational journeys differed greatly. The first graduate, David, commented that he had been "chasing an undergraduate degree for a long time" at different academic institutions. Once David separated from the Army and became unemployed, he "dug in" and said "I am going to do this. I am going to get it done." He then committed to earn a bachelor's degree at the online college and "did not look back." David recalled his willingness to "prioritize" education and his ability to "be creative if necessary to find ways to stay in school." He further stated,

> I chose to focus. It was an online program so it did afford me a bit of freedom and flexibility. My situations were such that I did not need to work so I chose not to work and focused completely on my studies.

These comments directly correspond to David's persistence, the choices or decisions he felt he had to make, and time management strategies he implemented to creatively complete his online degree program. The analysis of David's academic records showed that he transferred in credits from the military, the foreign language institute, a 2-year

college, and two 4-year colleges; he then completed 13 institutional credits to satisfy all degree requirements within two academic terms.

The second graduate, Luke, believed he was uniquely positioned to complete his degree. He customarily held a civilian job and served in the Reserves "one weekend a month [and] two weeks in the summer." However, Luke accepted orders to serve full-time on active duty in a position that supported the education and training of officers at a military college. He recognized his "unique position" to continue his education while stationed (assigned) at the unit where he "had a bit of free time available" to pursue a degree. All of his colleagues said to him, "Go for your degree. What better place to pursue it than here." He enrolled in the online college and "everything just started moving." He commented on being a "geographic bachelor" who did not relocate his family during his assignment at the military college and saw his family on weekends. He believed that being geographically separated from his family afforded him "a lot of evenings open to just dedicate to studies" and removed distractions such as television. He backwards planned and used some skills (i.e., time management, decision-making, and problem-solving) that he had learned in the military to set deadlines and manage major school projects.

Conversely, Luke recalled an academic "oversight" when an advisor approved a course that did not count toward his degree requirements. Luke, "obviously" frustrated at that time, reflected on the situation that impeded his academic progress,

> It pushed my graduation date further away. I mean it was kind of a hit because I was expecting to graduate almost 6 months prior, but it was basically keeping a

> positive attitude and things tend to work out and the timing was such that you just kind of dig in, you know, go for it.

Luke answered the interview questions by describing his behaviors, military decision-making process, path to degree completion, and success strategies. He indicated that for "almost two solid years" he had strategically planned how and when he would complete his bachelor's degree. His academic documents indicated that he steadily progressed toward degree completion; and then briefly stopped accruing credits. Luke referred to the academic oversight and explained the temporary break this way,

> I took 8 weeks off and that was a judgment call on my part. One because it was a bit of a hit you know that I was not prepared for -- I was not expecting. Two, it was the summer time so it was a couple of different factors. But, I jumped right back into it 8 weeks later and I think that break helped prepare me for that final push for those last two classes.

Family and peer support encouraged Luke and contributed to his academic success. He further stated that his "wife was very supportive of my taking time out of the weekend to dedicate to studying when it would [have been] easier just to spend time with her." In addition, Luke's work colleagues provided support by lending their time, reviewing papers, and encouraging him to complete his bachelor's degree program.

Matthew, the third graduate, measured his ability to remain engaged in academic activities as "pretty strong" because he believes in civilian education. He defined civilian education as a benefit earned through military service. Matthew further stated that a "lot of people just waste [their education benefit]" and he "did not want to be one of those

people." Matthew has had a long college career and, unlike his peers, framed commitment this way,

> Well honestly my commitment is to my children so I can provide them with a better life, okay? That is the idea behind my commitment. There is nothing personal about it -- well I should say special about it. I want to be able to get my kids the stuff I did not have growing up -- when my time in the service is over.

Matthew focused on the end state, which he defined "in military jargon" as "the mission complete or the final goal" to stay on track with degree completion. In other words,

> If you do not know what the end state is …or the final goal [and] lose sight of that that is something that will throw you off. Like being down range -- that could have been a huge hindrance -- you know being in combat. If you go away …it is a sacrifice on top of a sacrifice [because] you are sacrificing a year or 6 months away from your wife and kids. And then down range, you have got to sacrifice your time to do college on limited sleep.

In spite of these complicating issues, Matthew persisted to complete his bachelor's degree. He credited his success to his ability to seek out information to help him on the path and then modify his behavior (through modeling) to achieve desired outcomes (continuance) or avoid negative consequences (discontinuance) based on it.

Similarly, other participants referenced the commitments made to focus their time on important tasks and continue until graduation. Bryan stated that he is "very determined" to finish his online degree program and "pretty methodical" about staying on task. He created an "agitator [within his psyche] like a block that is not checked on a to-

do-list" and, in his opinion, that agitator "pops up and forces" him to do schoolwork every night. Bryan further suggested that he used his obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) to his advantage because the agitator repeatedly popped up and did "not go away" until he completed a required task. He described the choices he had to make to achieve academic success in his online degree program,

> A lot of it comes down to time management. That is the big thing so I have had to forego certain things to pursue school. So I have had to realign priorities and then manage what time I had to associate with that, with work, with different things that I may want to do other than school. So yeah, a lot of it is time management and just foregoing a trip to the mall, or a trip to the park, or a trip to wherever I could be going to sit down and do school or just generally it comes down to just missing sleep. That is probably the big one; it is just -- choose to miss sleep.

In spite of sleep deprivation, Bryan believed that his "drive to do better" has contributed to his academic success and he believes a degree will validate the skills he acquired in college. Another participant, Charles, a Guardsman explained his persistence this way,

> I think it is more of an internal drive mechanism. I think again it is wanting -- you know the desire to achieve a goal and to elevate the standards in my profession. I just knew that I had to put a certain amount of time aside each week. And I am very busy and I have a very busy job. I have the military. I have kids so you know juggling all of those things -- I really had to commit to the time commitment. Sometimes it was getting online at 6 a.m. or whatever it took.

Fernando also had a desire to align his intentions with positive outcomes and goal attainment. He mentioned time, commitment, and his shift in values as being required to stay on task,

> I think it is predominately based on time and what it means at the end really. I think that, especially for service members, it is really hard based on time and someone would say, "well, we do not have time," and I would say that we do. It is just inconvenient. I have persisted on and off based on time. I think that most recently I have been pressing on because I know I have to get it done. It is kind of a mile marker for me and, really, the motivation for me to stay persistent for my degree is that a lot of service members have gotten out [of the military,] and they wished they had finished [their degree] beforehand. So I guess in another way it is a mentorship thing like folks that have imparted knowledge on me to make sure [education is] something that I prioritize in my career.

Reflecting upon his self-readiness, Fernando planned to stay on track to complete his degree rather than travel down the same path as other service members who neglected to make their education a priority as they prepared to transition out of the military. Also, like other adult learners, Fernando is driven by the desire to become a "better professional" and "better person" overall. These high standards are the hallmark of core values (honor, personal courage, and commitment) ingrained in every military service member (Petrovich, 2012). Further, Fernando critically reflected on "knowing that pursuing a degree not only makes you a better service member but also a better member of society whenever you choose to retire or get out." In order to reach the end state,

Fernando admittedly "aims small" so that he might "miss small" and still succeed in his online degree program, career, and life.

Ingrid remarked about being "somewhat persistent" and about instances when she let her job interfere with her commitment to study. She discussed work and school (situational factors) and past experiences (dispositional factors) that she believed had limited her ability to persist in her online degree program,

> For me it comes down to how demanding is my job and how much mental and physical effort in time I need to put into my job. The less demand my job places on me in terms of after hour time, the more time I have to complete classes. However, with a recent job I had, I was at work literally almost 16 hours [each day] and even when I went home I was mentally committed to work, thinking about work so I did not take any classes at all during that time. That was a low priority for me at the time.

Remarkably different than her peers, the analysis of Ingrid's academic documents showed that she had a 4-year gap in accruing college credits, the approximate length of a service member's tour of duty. Unlike the significant number of military students who never return to earn a college degree, Ingrid then resumed her studies in the spring of 2015 and only needed four credits to graduate. According to her, on several occasions, she self-advised, took courses "that sounded like fun," and ended up with too many electives. Ingrid changed her strategy, contacted an academic advisor, and planned to only "take approved classes" to satisfy the requirements annotated on her academic plan.

Ingrid has also maintained a 4.0 GPA at the college and an overall 3.91 GPA when transfer credits are also considered.

Keisha discussed her military commitments and factors that she perceived as "big challenges." She talked about situational factors and said, "I am juggling the Reserves and trying to do [military service] schools in the Reserves and trying to do school for myself." Upon further probing, Keisha rephrased her response, saying that she is a Reservist who is on active duty full-time and at the same time attempts to attend both military service schools and college. While she wants to "finish" her degree, she must accept the military orders and report to a military service school. In Keisha's words,

> I want to finish, but like I said I am juggling the military, too. The reason why I did not sign up for classes this semester was because I was supposed to be in [a military service] school. But, then that got put on the back burner as usual so that kind of messed me over. And then, I want to sign up for classes now but I got a letter from my NCOs (non-commissioned officers) that they want to send me to a school. I consider right now for this semester I was not able to enroll [in a course] so I know I am off track at the moment. I plan to enroll.

Keisha juggled multiple responsibilities as a single-parent, Reservist, civilian employee, and college student. She sought family support, served in the Reserves, and quit her civilian job to "focus more on school."

Unlike his peers, Gregory first entered higher education in the spring of 2011 at the online college. He enrolled into the college and transferred in credits based on recommendations of ACE for education provided through military service schools and

military occupations. Effective spring 2015, he had accumulated 112 total credits and still labeled his persistence as moderate to high. As he noted,

> And why? Moderately because of the OPTEMPO [operational tempo] of my actual military career and high due to my drive to just finish the degree. I continually maintain taking two to three classes per 8-week term. I also took classes while I was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan …so I think that that, in essence, kind of shows my commitment to finishing my degree. I cannot say that I stayed on track the entire time. However, to stay on track, I made sure I took two to three classes per [term] -- maintained taking at least 8 hours out of the week to devote towards college work and [used] whatever chance I had for downtime to work on my school work.

It should be noted that OPTEMPO has multiple meanings and might be defined by workload, deployments, field training exercises (Thomas, Adler, & Castro, 2005) or other modern military operations that apply to the service member and the unit to which he or she is assigned (Boermans, Kamhuis, Delahaij, Korteling, & Euwem, 2013). However, in this context, Gregory socially constructed OPTEMPO to mean the frequency in which he must deploy (move around the world), participate in training exercises, and perform military duties during the course of his Army career.

Gregory's belief in his abilities seemed to heavily influence his academic motivation and learning. He committed to actively participate in two to three online courses, manage high levels of stress, and persisted while living and working in two highly demanding environments (combat and online education). While some soldiers

who deployed to combat zones (Iraq and Afghanistan) might have chosen to stop out or reduce their course load, Gregory embraced the challenges because he was driven by the desire to "finish" his degree. Gregory's academic documents showed that he successfully completed 18 credits and earned a 3.8 GPA during the period in which he was deployed in Afghanistan.

These military students all indicated that they had long aspired to earn a 4-year degree. Therefore, their refusal to let distractions stand in the way of completing a degree has helped them to focus on the end state. Perhaps concepts of self-efficacy might explain a belief in one's ability (Bandura, 1977) or contribute to cognitive judgments (van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011) to accomplish stated goals (Yusuf, 2011). Bandura (1977) theorized that "expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p. 191). For the most part, some people just believe that they can exert power over their ability to function under arduous circumstances (Bandura, 2012; Delahaij, Kamphuis, & van den Berg, 2016). All participants faced confusing dilemmas, engaged in critical self-examinations, and chose both common and unexpected strategies related to their roles in earning a college degree.

For example, these military students experienced longer than desirable time to degree while they pushed through institutional factors (policies and procedures), situational factors (school, work, and family obligations), and dispositional factors (age and past experiences) known to threaten persistence (Holder, 2007). The participants

refused to stop (Ashley, Bryan, Charles, David, Jayson, and Matthew), took at least one break (Emanuel, Fernando, Gregory, Henry, Keisha, and Luke), or stopped out for a long period of time (Ingrid) at the online college. The mixed responses from the students highlighted the importance of collecting data from key informants, especially those affiliated with the U.S. Armed Forces to determine the levels and type of support (academic, financial, and social) they need to achieve their goals (Durdella & Kim, 2012).

Theme 2: Determination to Accomplish Missions

The second theme, Determination to Accomplish Missions, showed that most students interviewed for this study relied upon their military training to adapt to different environments and enjoyed the flexible design of online learning. Even as the findings identified commonalities, the 13 military students desired different levels and type of support to complete their online degree programs. Jayson commented, "You need to teach yourself" and his peer, Bryan, elaborated, saying that "a lot of those things [learning activities] are forceful to push you" toward student engagement. Other students appreciated the "flexibility in that I could work on my degree at virtually any time, day, or night and any day of the week and any time of day" so long as deadlines were met. The students did not express an interest in online learning resources, course calendars, or other tools embedded in the learning management system that were designed to enhance their academic success. Nor did they value a "big, grand strategy" to complete their online degree program. Instead, they used time management skills, set short- and long-

term goals, checked the syllabi, or reviewed their degree audits to "plan for, anticipate, and overcome" any challenges.

These skill sets were viewed as having prepared these military students to accomplish their personal missions. As a case in point, Ashley completed 27 credits prior to joining the military and continued her education at the online college, transferring in both college and military credits. As of spring 2015, she needed eight credits to earn a bachelor's degree. When asked about decisions or choices she made to persist in her degree program, she commented,

> I do not allow myself to have a choice. I have to do it. It is like paying the bills or feeding my kid. It is one of those necessary things. I have a lot of commitments so I do not have a lot of time for entertainment or fun. So, for me, sitting down for an hour and doing homework at this point in my life is really easy because I am not missing out…. I am not missing out on anything fun. I sit in front of my computer and just knock out my homework.

Because Ashley did not "finish" her first degree program before she joined the military, she believed it is "really important" for her to earn a bachelor's degree. Ashely believed that completing her degree "is not an impossible task [because] it is not a big deal compared to some of the things" she has accomplished. If she continued to complete 6 credits per term, she most likely remained on track to finish her bachelor's degree in fall 2015.

Another student, Jayson, transferred in 30 credits from four colleges and universities (earned face-to-face and online), foreign language proficiency, and military

credits, and he had previously earned an associate's degree. As of spring 2015, he needed 11 credits to complete a bachelor's degree. Jayson maintained a single-minded focus, attempted "one course at a time," and planned to take a course every 8 weeks until graduation.

Veterans of the armed forces, David, Emanuel, and Henry, were also determined to complete military and personal missions. However, unlike their active duty peers, these veteran students transitioned out of the military in the midst of their college careers. According to David, "money was a little bit tight, but I was creative …eating beans and rice and rice and beans …not spending a ton of money." He took full advantage of Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to fund his education and cover some living expenses. David recounted his experience by saying,

> Because I was not working, I was able to make [education] my reason for being. That was my purpose when I woke up in the morning -- to do well on my school work -- to strive to get those four Os and so that is what I did. And again, I cannot stress the lifestyle enough. I think that getting up and getting square meals and getting exercise and then having dedicated study time -- that regimented schedule -- to sit down and focus and do well on the school work was just pivotal for me.

David positively adjusted to his new lifestyle, achieved life balances, and completed his undergraduate education.

Another veteran, Emanuel, retired from the military and continued his education while working approximately 52 hours in a 4-day work week. Although Emanuel

believed that "work definitely can cause a person to stop" persisting, he stated that he has to do whatever it takes to sustain his family and himself. Therefore, Emanuel enjoyed the convenience of online learning to stay committed and attain a college degree. Emanuel further stated that, "If it was not at my convenience, then I probably would not be as aggressive at my education as I am today." Emanuel's academic documents seemed to show that he swirled or simultaneously enrolled (coenrolled) in a traditional college and the online college to complete 49 credits; and at this pace, Emanuel expected to graduate by spring 2016.

Henry, the third veteran, indicated that he is a DoD civilian contractor who deploys "back and forth to different areas in the world" to do his job. That really determines the amount of time he can devote to his schooling and his "rhythm" in progressing towards degree completion. Furthermore, he needs "a degree to be competitive in the future" and, therefore, is "trying to move through the track as quickly as possible based on the other distracters of job, life, and whatever." Based on the limited time available to complete courses, Henry has chosen to earn credit by exam by taking a College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or DSST (formerly known as DANTES Subject Standardized Tests) examination to "make some forward movement." According to information posted on the DSST website, examinations are ideal for the independent learners who want to test out of subjects they already know.

Determination to accomplish missions emerged as a common element during interviews. Of the 13 participants, two made reference to a holistic approach to learning. David explained that people need a routine,

> I think our military experience speaks volume to that effect. We do better when we have a schedule and when we know what is expected of us each and every day. So I try to stick with a routine of waking up at the same time, getting the same good quality meals every day, setting aside that same time every day to study and focus on what I want to do. I think that comes down to personal grit where you need to make a decision. This is my life, this is what I want out of life, and I am going to sacrifice these moments of pleasure on the computer to sit down and open up Blackboard. And I am going to focus and read my assignments, and write my papers, and write my discussion posts at this time. And that is what I did. I was disciplined.

David thought this strategy helped him ensure he would stay on track with his studies "rather than haphazardly studying or being disorganized." He suggested that the degree completion goal is based on integrating positive psychology, resiliency, and emotional strength to achieve life missions (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Pargament & Sweeney, 2011). Furthermore, David believed that commitment might mean "refusing social engagement." In the self-directed learning process, he independently planned, monitored, and evaluated different learning opportunities to set and achieve realistic goals.

Luke held similar beliefs about staying on track and reiterated the need to manage time because completing a degree is not "simply sitting down and cracking the books open." Instead, he felt a need to go running on occasion, and this, he believed, helped

him to be "more energized, better focused." Luke stated that this strategy is good to manage time,

> You have to dedicate the time to cracking the books open but coupled with that is keeping a holistic approach to learning. It cannot all be books. It cannot all be goofing off, but you have to mix in time to go give your brain a break.

David's and Luke's holistic approaches to learning are also linked to the conceptual framework of this study (see Figure 1). Special attention should be drawn to the output box in Figure 1 that shows some common objectives of military students who aspire to enhance their self-worth, complete a degree, develop knowledge, become career-ready, or address a combination of these overlapping goals.

All participants conveyed an orientation to learning that is life-centered and focused on tasks, problems, or challenges. The majority of the participants shared a sense of ownership towards degree completion, performed purposeful tasks, and looked for opportunities to achieve the end goal. These processes are commonly associated with grit or control of one's own education (Almeida, 2016). While this study solely focused on persisters, the findings support the idea that a myriad of factors can either advance, slow, or stop military students' academic progress. Participants in this study seldom asked for help even as they encountered life experiences that most college students do not face either inside or outside the college environment. Instead, the military students held optimistic judgments about their capabilities and performed a designated level of academic activities to earn a college degree.

Theme 3: The Call for Military Culture Awareness

The third theme, The Call for Military Culture Awareness, related to the need for representatives of the college and instructors to be keenly aware of military culture. In the spring of 2015, approximately 40% of those students enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at UNYC self-identified as either a service member or veteran. Gaps in knowledge and practices, identified by the participants, can be filled by academic professionals who are familiar with this diverse population and are willing to develop services to enhance military students' academic success (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015). This is evident in that the participants spoke about the personalized support they received to manage various situational, dispositional, and institutional factors that interrupted their pursuit of a higher education. Further, the analysis of participants' status reports and degree plans illustrated that all attained good academic standing and persisted to their senior year of study.

When questioned about factors that contributed to their academic success, the participants expressed culturally diverse perspectives. Gregory, a soldier who had deployed to and returned from both Iraq and Afghanistan, discussed a "slight challenge" he experienced in a course related to military combat,

> Well, I recently took the PTSD course [at the college] and personally suffer from PTSD. Taking that course was an actual challenge for me because some of the [material] dealt with military experiences and issues with PTSD in the military. Some of it gave me some flashbacks towards what I actually had to go through. But the steps that I took to push forward were [to engage] the support of my

> family, of course, [and] talking with my instructor. And through speaking with my instructor and sharing my experiences via our discussion boards, they [sic] gave me the strength -- and my family, of course -- gave me the strength to keep carrying on to complete the course, which I just finished.

There was no more than minimal risk of psychological stress in the interview, and Gregory freely shared his personal experiences. He openly discussed the energy he has expended to interact with his peers and course instructors. Gregory believed that his "biggest strategy" for academic progress was to purposefully plan each course and term for the year. He provided the "perfect example" of matching courses/terms because "it gave me the maximum amount of time to work on the classes and put forth my best work." Gregory often spoke of meaningful interactions with academic advisors, peers, and instructors that generated appropriate support and boosted his academic success.

Another participant, Ashley, shared a glimpse of what it was like to fulfill her military, family, and academic obligations or a combination of these competing priorities. Ashley indicated that she worked "7 days on and then 2 days off, which is very cohesive to [the] school week." She further stated that completing "this [online degree program] is not an impossible task; maybe because I am older in life and I can see it as like… you know, it is not a big deal compared to some of the things I have accomplished." Ashley is "incredibly dedicated to the things in life that matter," and her end goal is to make a decent amount of money to take care of her young son, pets, house, and other things of importance.

Similarly, Bryan, worked "18-hour days" and has had the "resolve not to go to bed" some nights until he "accomplished something in the way of school." When it came to managing situations that impeded his progress, Bryan said that he has "been able to just suck it up and do it." However, he provided two "instances" where he communicated with some of the academic staff to let them know "that, hey, I am not at a computer, and I won't be for the next foreseeable three days or something like that so I just need to let you guys know; and they have understood that." Bryan's absence was excused by the instructor similar to the time he "got stuck in Amsterdam [the Netherlands]" during his travel to another temporary job assignment. In Bryan's words, the instructors "were able to say, well, you know, we understand, so we are going to give you a 2-day grace period or something."

Charles, recalled two situations in which he reached out to his course instructors for support,

> I had to go on active duty, so I had requested to submit a post a little early. So I was permitted to do that. Another time, I was away at a little bit more of an extended period of time, so I did converse with the instructor. She did allow me to do coursework and actually offered suggestions on how I could get the work done and still stay within the rules in terms of posting my work.

When asked about a recent challenge he had to overcome in his online degree program, Charles replied, "Golly, I really had no problems at all with this program. I just had no problems." He took time to reflect and then moved on to discuss a relevant academic advising experience. Charles worked with an academic advisor because he wanted to

"complete the program in the least minimum time as possible and still be successful at it." He described the academic advisor as "quite assertive" in that she "highly recommended against" his original plan to map out courses for degree completion. Charles believed that the advisor backed up her recommendation with "good reasoning" and explained that the amount of time he needed to complete courses and "still work a full-time job." Collaboratively, Charles and the academic advisor "re-organized the classes," and he believed that "she was absolutely right and on target and really helped me to be successful."

Another student, Henry, offered a different perspective, stating that "military advisors" are the key to his being able to know when to earn credit by examination. He noted further that, "That is important to me as a military student because it gets me through the track quicker and helps me identify the focus area that I need to work on that are not appropriate for CLEP." He continued to talk about being a contractor who deployed to Afghanistan twice in 2014,

> Those [deployments] were 4 to 5 months a piece and 15-hour days at least. Sometimes -- obviously, I am showing up there at 7:30 a.m., and I am not getting to bed sometimes many, many, many nights until one o'clock in the morning. And then, I am getting up. When my job cuts into that time, I am getting home at 7:00 and 8:00 at night -- I am not doing anything, and I cannot commit to anything because I do not have any mental energy to give because of my age group. Younger guys can do it, or [I would do it] if I was obviously not in a secure job you know what I mean?

Henry summarized his comments and stated, “My strategy is that if I am in a position in my job where I am getting home seven o’clock at night, I am not doing it.” Instead, he would hold off a semester until his job let him “calm back down” to be home at 6:00 p.m. Although the “hour does not seem like a lot,” he needed to “decompress, take care of family matters, bed everybody else down,” and then do his school work. In his view, commitment was critical to success, but unrealistic expectations were not helpful.

Service members learn to put the mission first when they are indoctrinated into the military (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). Similarly, Ingrid shared this perspective in her response to research questions regarding persistence. She described her ability to continue as “somewhat persistent” depending on the responsibilities and demands of her job. Ingrid revisited the time when she worked long hours and stated,

> When I have the time, the first thing I do is I enroll and I complete classes. However, I do let my job, interfere with my commitment to study. My priorities have always been to put myself into work first and then [work on] my academics or studies. So whereas I am always willing to [take courses], I am not always ready to take on that additional responsibility.

Ingrid commented that she “actually stopped taking classes two years ago” because of a job assignment. She explained, “I went into a job and I was finishing a class and then I realized that I could not put my full effort into my work and studies, so I stopped taking classes for about two years.” Ingrid supported this information with two examples. First, she spoke about a military assignment where she had a “somewhat normal 0630 to 1800

job." She indicated that working from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. provided "plenty of time" for her to complete a paper.

In the second example, Ingrid compared her experiences of "trying to finish a class" to "getting ready to go on a deployment." She stated that her "focus was deploying," and she did not put "much effort or time into the paper because it was just a matter of just get it done." According to Ingrid, she surprisingly "got an 'A' on both papers." In that effort, Ingrid believed that the two most common things she had to manage were family time and sleep. For example, Ingrid added, "I may opt to not go do something with my family and push them …to go do something on their own so I can stay back and concentrate on my studies or just stay up late or get up early." In Ingrid's opinion, these situations did not impede her progress because she still completed her courses.

Fernando commented on periods of TAD (temporary additional duty) assignments that disrupted his pursuit of higher education. However, he stopped short of explaining the situations and said, "I actually have not had as many challenges as other folks, but I have had to drop a couple of courses here and there …I guess you just take it in stride." Returning to the research questions, he explained that while "most instructors were very flexible" with his schedule, he was "gone for the first week of a class" and "could not get credit for some" of his coursework. In Fernando's opinion, that was okay, and he "pressed on" just knowing that he had to do well in other areas of the course. He briefly paused and stated,

> I think overall there are not a lot of impediments that you cannot overcome really as a service member. I mean as long as your leadership knows that -- if they approve -- if they sign off on you taking classes, they have to support you because, if not, they are going to have to be the ones that support you or write the letter that justifies why you could not do your homework because they signed off on letting you go. I do not think there are a lot of impediments to doing the degree. I think it is just a mindset that a lot of service members have, they are like "well, I do not have enough time," but I mean I was one of them, too. I would not say I did not have time but I would rather be doing other things, so I think that overall everybody's capable of doing it. They just have to want to -- they have to have the desire. I think a lot do.

Fernando stated that he is "not the model student." However, as a leader, he continued his education to set an example for his junior Marines and expected to graduate by summer 2015.

In contrast to Fernando's views, Matthew said that persistence is "harder for military personnel." He suggested that willingness "would be a huge part of that self-improvement piece." And then, Matthew continued, saying,

> For readiness, the reason I think it is difficult is, whether you have been in the military for three years or you have been in the military for 17 years -- you go through a basic training that -- I do not want to say brainwashes you, but -- conforms you to a different environment, to a different lifestyle, and it is not really an academic one. But it teaches you a lot of the same fundamentals --

> persistence, self-improvement -- that fall along the same lines, but you lose that academic piece, you know? Was I willing to take a math class? Yes, I was willing to take it. Was I ready for the math class? Probably not. It had been nearly a decade since I had taken math.

Interestingly, an analysis of Matthew's academic record confirmed that he took a math course toward the end of his bachelor's degree program and earned an "A" grade. Yet, he said persistence is about "being an example for [his] soldiers" rather than the grade to motivate them to achieve excellence.

On the other hand, Keisha enrolled in two online courses; and then, in the middle of the academic term, received orders to attend a military service school. Instead of "dropping the [college] classes," she made the best of the situation "because it was too late to actually withdraw" from the courses. The "outcome was not good," but she "completed" the courses. There are two student policies posted on the college's website with which Keisha was not familiar, ones that related to course extensions or withdrawals in special cases, and Keisha did not discuss plans to reach out to the academic advisor, course instructors, or Army Education Counselors for assistance. An analysis of her academic records showed that she typically attempted 6-9 credits each trimester and had an overall GPA that decreased from 3.29 to 2.99 between fall 2012 and spring 2014. During the spring 2014 trimester, Keisha initially attempted 12 credits, later withdrew from a 3-credit course, and actually completed 9 credits. However, in summer 2014, Keisha completed 6 credits, earned a 4.0 semester GPA, and her GPA rose to 3.06

overall. She planned to "squeeze in one or two 8-week classes" to further her progress in the second half of the summer 2015 term.

The transition from active duty service to the civilian life yielded different outcomes for David and Emanuel. Specifically, David commented on his ability to continue his education after his separation from the military,

> Well I think in my case being a military or former military student, a recipient of the GI Bill, I think my benefits and the VA's role in distributing my benefits and the smoothness of that operation was a big factor -- the fact that they were able to pay me a housing allowance and some other things.

David maintained a single-minded focus on education, planned coursework around the 7th day (Saturday) Sabbath, and completed his bachelor's degree program within two academic terms. At the end of the interview, David said that he considered it a "tremendous blessing" to have finished his undergraduate degree with 16 months of Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to spare.

Emanuel, on the other hand, said that he experienced financial challenges during his transition from active duty service to military retirement in 2014. Emanuel applied for his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits prior to his retirement, but he had to wait for a VA representative to process his veterans' benefits claim. Determined to register for the spring 2015 term, Emanuel said that he spoke to Army education counselors "on post" who informed him that he could still use his TA while on terminal leave (accrued time prior to retirement from military service). Emanuel said, "When I tried to sign up for courses for the TA, I could not do it. They were like `you already signed out of the unit.

You cannot get any TA` [while on terminal leave]." Disappointed, Emanuel "had to wait 8 weeks until the funds" became available. Emanuel said, "That was the only obstacle that I know that stressed me out . . . Other than that, once the funds came in, I just kept on."

On a related topic, Jayson, cited frequent travel as "one of the big problems." Although Jayson was on shore duty (a naval land base), he frequently traveled "all over the world …from the east coast to the west coast and from Hawaii to Japan." Jayson suggested that "travelling back and forth to those different locations …costs lost days, which means …I do not have [Internet] connections." Time permitted, Jayson worked ahead or requested his instructor's permission to complete the coursework once he returned to a stable environment. This finding supports the claim that military students can encounter both common and unique experiences as they work towards degree completion.

Luke revisited earlier comments about his time commitment. He thought, "It would have been easy to take those two years" he was assigned to the military college and "go home at night, or workout, or any number of things other than pursuing the degree." However, once he decided to pursue a bachelor's degree, he made a commitment to "stay engaged" in the program until graduation. Soon thereafter he learned about an academic error and considered a different course of action. He turned to military officials, "these experts -- these individuals to contribute to that decision-making process as far as taking that time off." Luke felt empowered by his support network and reverted back to his work environment where "getting angry" was considered a "rash

decision." Being in this work environment "tended to frame my ability to look at things objectively." He indicated that he used war gaming to push through, and this meant "taking the hit, redirecting, and refocusing that energy …on understanding that it is going to work out." Finally, Luke enjoyed the camaraderie with other military students and said, "It was neat to be on the other side of the chalkboard" and experience education from the student perspective rather than as an instructor who facilitates courses in the military.

Matthew said that he used education as an escape from combat. He stated, "What I experienced when I was down range …gave me an opportunity to get away from combat and experience a piece of reality from back home." He enjoyed class discussions because, "as horrible as it sounds, it is not the same conversation that you have with your [family] just about every other phone call." His participation in a course offered him a chance to "escape Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, or wherever" for a "short period of time to experience" life outside of the military.

In a sampling of other student responses, Gregory said "Everything is usually a challenge to get things done." He recounted another situation that called for him to reach out to the academic staff. Gregory said that he "had to go to a field exercise …an area where there was no Internet for a week." Once again, he contacted his course instructor and collaboratively developed a course completion plan. This "really helped" ensure that he did "not have to worry about assignments" while he trained in the field. There is no doubt that the participants' military training and education played a role in their academic success. The participants' lifelong learning experiences should continue to span across

their work life, professional development, civilian education, and society (Persyn & Polson, 2012). The sampling of all responses is presented in a narrative summary of the findings to further explain the three overarching themes.

Summary of Findings

In this qualitative study, the intent was to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that military students perceive as impacting their ability and willingness to earn an online college degree. Through semistructured interviews, military students commented on what it means for them to persist despite deployments, TAD assignments, civilian job demands, finances, family and social obligations, academic policies and procedures, inadequate or incorrect information, and past experiences. They also suggested that these factors "did not stop" or end their educational pursuits. All military students believed in their ability to persist regardless of the adverse situations they encountered.

There was a strong sense of duty when the majority attempted to respond to questions about challenges that delayed their academic growth. For example, most students introduced a host of issues, and then typically made statements indicating that military obligations like deployment "did not impede my progress," said that "I really had no problems," or stated that "I did not actually experience too many hardships [and] there were not any terrible, terrible hardships," or "I do not think I have really had any problems." These responses suggest that participants believed in their ability to persist in spite of adverse situations they encountered (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Military students budgeted their time, pushed through adversity, and persisted over the course of their academic careers at the college.

The research questions included one central question and four subquestions in alignment with the problem of military students stopping short of earning an online college degree and the purpose of this study. In sum, the following research questions were answered.

What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree? Military students identified institutional factors (policies and procedures), situational factors (school, work, and family obligations), and dispositional factors (age and past experiences) that impact their persistence toward degree completion. At the same time, the students believed that some factors contributed to their academic success: (a) military-friendly policies and procedures, (b) balance between school, work, and family, and (3) maturity gained from real-world experiences. While the study solely focused on persisters, mixed findings support the idea that a myriad of factors can either advance, slow, or stop military students' academic progress. Findings, supported by the principles of andragogy and the literature review, provided information-rich data and resulted in the recommendations made to address the one central question and the four subquestions answered in the study.

RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college? Military students measure their engagement in academic activities by their ability to remain focused (n = 7); be dutiful in their studies (n = 4); and factors not yet completely resolved (n = 2), though both students remain intent on graduation as time permits.

RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college? Military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities as high because they are always willing to earn a college degree. However, in spring 2015, the interview data and analysis of students' status reports and degree plans revealed some missed opportunities for military students, advisors, and others to engage in meaningful conversations about course extensions, military withdrawals, time management, and past experiences that advanced, impeded, or stopped students' persistence to degree. The analysis of one students' status report and degree plan showed nearly 4 years of inactivity, which is the approximate length of a service member's tour of duty. The student reportedly experienced willingness, but was not "ready to take on that additional responsibility." The student stopped out of the online college for approximately 4 years, returned in the spring of 2015, and was on track to earn a bachelor's degree by spring 2016.

RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs? One student stopped out for nearly 4 years; 6 students took at least one break; and the remaining 6 students refused to stop out of the online college. In most instances, the students strategically plan to complete their educational goals at their own pace rather than be concerned about an artificially set target based on average time to degree. The military students in this study are nontraditional learners who, at times, unintentionally exhibit behaviors and enrollment patterns known to threaten their persistence to degree. But, the majority still show high levels of commitment to persist

as can be seen from the responses to questions about their persistence, decisions, and success strategies. Although their behaviors have resembled those of nonpersisters (inactive) or college dropouts (departures), the reality is that these military students have either finished their degrees or are closing in on them.

RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs? Military students consider time management skills, short- and long-term goals, syllabi reviews, and degree audits important to "plan for, anticipate, and overcome" any challenges. All military students conveyed an orientation to learning that is life-centered and focused on tasks, problems, or challenges. The majority of the participants shared a sense of ownership towards degree completion, performed purposeful tasks, and looked for opportunities to achieve the end goal. These processes are commonly associated with grit or control of one's own education (Almeida, 2016). Participants in this study seldom asked for help even as they encountered life experiences that most college students do not face either inside or outside the college environment. Instead, the military students held optimistic judgments about their capabilities and performed a designated level of academic activities to earn a college degree.

All military students traveled nontraditional education pathways and experienced disruptions along the way. The students' status reports and degree plans were used to plot their movement across institutions and gain more insight into their persistence. Data in Table 3 illuminated military students' long college careers to include an approximate number of years each student has been in pursuit of a postsecondary education. The

category labeled years in pursuit of a higher education is positive in that it represents historical data and continuance (see Table 3).

Table 3

Military Students' Commitment to Earn a Bachelor's Degree (as of Spring 2015)

Participant (pseudonym)	Year began at first institution	Years in pursuit of a higher education	Total credits remaining to earn a bachelor's degree	Academic status
Ashley	2002	13	8	Enrolled
Bryan	2000	15	9	Enrolled
Charles	1977	38	4	Enrolled
David	2004	11	0	Graduated
Emanuel	1993	22	13	Enrolled
Fernando	2006	9	6	Enrolled
Gregory	2011	4	9	Enrolled
Henry	1981	34	16	Enrolled
Ingrid	1988	27	4	Enrolled
Jayson	1993	22	11	Enrolled
Keisha	2004	11	28	Enrolled
Luke	1992	23	0	Graduated
Matthew	1996	19	0	Graduated

Time to degree clearly varies, in part, because all students had had diverse college careers and planned to persist at their own pace. David, Luke, and Matthew graduated and the remaining students needed 12 or fewer semester credits (n = 7) or planned to complete 13-28 semester credits (n = 3) to earn a bachelor's degree.

The majority (n = 12) of these students transferred course work, though Gregory attended no other institution, beginning his college career at the online college in the spring of 2011. What is interesting about the years in pursuit of a degree is that all transfer students far exceeded the typical 6-year time to degree completion, and yet these students either graduated or planned to complete their bachelor's degree at their current

online college by spring 2016. Gregory, however, was on a fast track at the time of this study and expected to graduate from his first institution within the 6-year timeframe.

The 13 military students collectively accumulated more than 1,550 college credits over the course of their college careers. The majority of these students studied at different institutions in the course of their careers or prematurely left higher education, but then chose to restart their education at the online college with the intent to graduate. However, "self-efficacious students [tended to] participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter[ed] difficulties" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 86) in contrast to those peers who doubted their own academic capabilities. Thus, the persisters' levels of performance typically fluctuated over the course of their college careers.

As with most colleges, UNYC collects data on completions rather than completers. As a result, academically successful students like Gregory are not apparent to those outside of the college, especially as they continue to use active duty TA funding and persist in online degree programs. The Department of Education's IPEDS recently added online offerings, and their National Center for Education Statistics now collects data on the total number of recipients who receive DoD tuition and veterans' education benefits to total the amount awarded through an institution (Allen & Seaman, 2015). But capturing persistent learners to inform a wider audience through the professional literature remains problematic. For my purposes, it is sufficient to say that Gregory and his peers have persisted and had clear plans to graduate shortly from UNYC with a bachelor's degree.

There is still much we need to understand about military culture and military-affiliated students if we are to address the challenges they face when they return to college (Cass & Hammond, 2015; Rausch, 2014). All participants shared information about military commitments, operations, and values that are not well understood within higher education (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Jones, 2013; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). The term *military students* was used to describe both service members and veterans; however, the findings illuminated an increasingly diverse population of people within this population. Demographic shifts are hardly a secret, both in the military and in higher education. While this qualitative study can help college officials better understand military student experiences, this important student population is still neglected in the literature (Cass & Hammond, 2015), in professional development training, and when demographics across academic institutions of higher education are considered. This study, however, adds to the body of literature and will help raise awareness of issues that confront military students who juggle school, work, and life responsibilities and to effectively address them.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of military students who were progressing towards their bachelor's degree in online degree programs in a single university. To ensure confidentiality, the college was referred to as UNYC. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants, all of whom had persisted in their online degree programs and could shed light on the topic. Thirteen military students who had either recently completed degrees or were on a path to complete their

academic programs were interviewed. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants and added to the interview transcripts and field notes.

The focus of this basic qualitative study was to gain insight into military students' experiences rather than solve their problem of their stopping short of earning a college degree online because researchers use qualitative approaches to describe what it is like for individuals to experience a phenomenon and how they experience it. The answers to the central question and four subquestions provided a deeper understanding of some factors associated with participants' ability and willingness to persist until graduation, choices they make to persist, and important strategies they use to persist in their online degree programs.

Data collection occurred during a 4-week period in the spring of 2015. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews, transcribed data, and analyzed status reports and degree plans while maintaining the role of a data collection instrument. The findings showed that these military students purposefully planned to persist, powered through complex situations, and looked to experts in academia to ensure that those who could impact their progress were keenly aware of military students' diverse needs. The alignment of these three factors typically helped military students feel well prepared to complete their online degree programs. Five validation strategies were used in this study: (a) triangulation, (b) adequate engagement in data collection, (c) researcher's position or reflexivity, (d) peer review/examination, and (e) rich, thick descriptions.

The data clearly showed that these adult learners preferred to control their educational program, preferring to self-direct their journey through complex situations

rather than ask for help. Analysis of the interview data and academic documents revealed three common themes: (a) Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, (b) Determination to Accomplish Missions, and (c) The Call for Military Culture Awareness. Discrepant data was then considered for future analysis. The findings of the study were presented as they related to these three themes, and a white paper was developed and designed to inform academic leaders at UNYC as they develop programs and policies to encourage persistence for current and future military students. Section 3 describes a white paper (Appendix A) that was developed as a result of the findings in this research.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In this section, I describe the white paper that was developed based on my study (see Appendix A). The project deliverable is a white paper based on an analysis of qualitative data collected during interviews of 13 military students. It is designed to support UNYC's FY 2015 to 2019 strategic plan, which includes the college's affirmation to support students' success. This section contains a description of the project, its goals, rationale, literature review, implementation, project evaluation, and implications for social change. Finally, the white paper will inform the site's operations member, academic professionals, and other stakeholders of the findings and recommendation concerning military students' persistence to degree.

Description and Goals

Qualitative research guided the development of the white paper emanating from the project study. It consists of an executive summary, a statement of the problem, comments about the significance of the problem, a description of adult learning and persistence, its purpose, themes, findings, and recommendations of my study, closing thoughts, and references. The goal set when developing the white paper was to provide decision-makers with information that will help them understand and address local problems. The qualitative study and white paper focused on helping academic professionals better understand why military students persist within this online learning environment. Four recommendations are provided in the white paper to raise awareness about the knowledge, skills, and competences required of those professionals who work

with service members and veterans. Alternatives that might be considered to enhance professional development of those UNYC employees assigned to help military students were also included.

Rationale

A white paper format was chosen to address issues relating to military student persistence to highlight ways academic professionals across the college can collaborate to assist and encourage military students to earn a college degree. The findings, reported in Section 2, illuminated the importance of connecting with service members and veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), training faculty and academic advisors (ACE, 2015), and supporting military students as they address their educational and career goals (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). During the semistructured interviews conducted in the course of my study, service members and veterans commented on their intent to push through complex situations, earn a bachelor's degree, and prepare themselves to compete in the civilian workforce. These military students seldom asked for help in spite of the challenges they faced. A review of the status reports and degree plans revealed some missed opportunities for military students, advisors, and others to engage in meaningful conversations about policies and procedures, commitments, and past experiences that have advanced, impeded, or stopped students' persistence to degree. This content of the white paper aligns with military students' perceived needs, professional development initiatives, and the keys to their success.

Review of the Literature

The literature review was constructed by using online library databases, journals, and ebooks. Searches in Walden's online library led to databases such as ebrary, EBSCO ebooks, ERIC, and ProQuest Central, to name a few. One group of scholarly journals focused on this area and included *Innovative Higher Education, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, Journal of Human Resources, National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Journal,* and *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, among others. Key words used were *white paper, whitepapers, academic advising, adult learning, military education, professional development, staff development,* and *training*.

White Papers

The earliest form of white papers outlined governmental policies (Willerton, 2012). Authors generally produced persuasive essays to justify programs (Stelzner, 2007) or provided problem and solution papers to present problems along with solutions that might address those problems (Juricek, 2009). Both forms of white papers offered flexibility in that authors reported their findings of real problems, offered an in-depth analysis of problems, and recommended actions to solve the problems. White papers are still written to set forth policies and are considered viable tools for use in every industry (Stelzner, 2010; Willerton, 2012).

While white papers are not peer-reviewed, the content is typically research based. In an online search for white papers, articles, blogs, books, and PowerPoint presentations about the mechanics of developing them were found. Online library search engines

returned 172,585 results for white papers published within the last 5 years. Of those, 39% of the white papers appended to peer-reviewed articles appeared in scholarly journals that addressed a wide variety of issues in diverse areas of policy development, to include education, health, law, and war. White papers are a synopsis of the research plan (Lyons & Luginsland, 2014) that help decision makers consider how best to apply research to real problems (Graham, 2014).

Researchers must consider the target audience and the purpose for which the paper is being written when seeking to develop an effective white paper (Willerton, 2012). Gordon and Graham (2003) and Kemp (2005) described four common purposes of white papers, suggesting that they most often are expected to (a) market a product or service, (b) promote technology, (c) fund a project, or (d) show expertise. In the culminating project for this study, a white paper was designed to address the problem of military students stopping short of completing their online degree programs. The white paper was modelled on the example of Powell (2012) to introduce another white paper in the field of education and extend this genre beyond audiences situated in the government, information technology, and marketing. The white paper was designed to inform those leaders at UNYC who oversee the college's efforts to meet the needs of military students, bringing to their attention information about their educational experiences and their experiences about the services offered them and making recommendations about ways to improve services offered to this population.

The content of white papers is typically informative, educational, and written for multiple purposes. Gordon and Graham (2003), Stelzner (2007), and Juricek (2009) suggested the use of the following components in the development of a white paper:

1. Introduction or background,
2. Executive summary or abstract,
3. Possible solutions,
4. Closing thoughts, and
5. Sources.

Variations of each component were integrated into the white paper located in Appendix A. The white paper consists of recommendations to both support military students and further develop the competencies of advisors, counselors, and others who work with this important student population. The recommendations provide a framework for the success of academic professionals who evaluate sources of college credits and counsel military students, operationalizing research results in a way that a webinar focused on a single topic, lengthy research paper, or directive does not.

Training and Development

Research should inform practice. Based on a literature review conducted in fall 2015, I found that the online college was one of more than 1,900 colleges and universities pledged to help military students achieve their educational and career goals (ED, 2015). Step 7 of the pledge focuses on training for professionals who work with the military student population, aligned with the three themes (i.e., commitment, missions, and military culture awareness), and guided the development of the white paper. As a result,

the white paper was developed to raise awareness about these requirements for professional development for those who provide support for military students in their pursuit of higher education (Richardson, Ruckert, & Marion, 2015). The appended white paper also stresses the importance of equipping this diverse student population with the critical skills needed to succeed at UNYC and after graduation.

The literature review was based on advising handbooks, scholarly articles, and scholarly books that inform best practices in academic advising (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2014). Drake, Jordan, and Miller (2013) edited an academic advising handbook that described the importance of advising, training, and professional development. According to Drake et al., Habley's framework--informational, conceptual, and relational skills--are foundational components of advising. Academic advisors must apply all three components to deliver sound academic advisement. Therefore, advisor training programs should focus on the enrichment of advisors' knowledge (informational), understanding (conceptual), and interpersonal (relational) skills.

However, little training is provided. Professional development events might be held once a year, continued throughout the year, or discontinued after initial training periods end (Robbins, 2012). Advisors might gain on-the-job experience in lieu of formal training, and this uncertainty can be a problem given that advising is only one of the duties assigned to them. As a result, advising competencies are most often learned at will and are seldom consistent on any campus (Daly & Sidell, 2013).

Robbins (2012) further suggested that training and development programs primarily focus on the informational component of advisors' jobs and place little emphasis on the relational and conceptual components. The informational component encompasses institution-specific policies, procedures, programs, and resources that advisors need to know about. Consequently, academic leaders usually set high expectations for professional advisors to know these informational variables. Besides knowledge of the institution, advisors must also know and understand students in order to build meaningful advisor-advisee relationships.

Academic advising is conceptually linked to a variety of developmental and learning theories rather than a single one (Kimball & Campbell, 2013). Knowledge of developmental and adult learning theories helps advisors understand that advisees might self-advise, contact advisors when encouraged to do, or disengage altogether from those hired to assist them. Even as students exhibit different stages of development and learn differently, academic advisors can support students' academic freedom, monitor their progress, and deliver effective advising services from enrollment to degree completion. The academic advising process involves learning that is problem-centered, transformational, experiential, and motivational. There is not a universal advising strategy or theory that fits every student and every situation. Working together, advisors and advisees solve problems before learners become overwhelmed by disorienting situations.

From a historical perspective, *New Directions for Community Colleges*, edited by King (1993), includes chapters dedicated to academic advising that is specific to student

success. In this volume, King, Raushi, and others introduced new ideas on the important connection between academic advising and student success. King noted that developmental advising is a process and that the advisor-advisee relationship develops over time. Her focus was on community colleges, and her papers focused on defining, describing, and identifying a variety of academic advising models in use on these campuses, but much of this applies to advising on other campuses equally well.

In King's volume, Raushi (1993) argued that developmental advising is "process shaped, nurtured, and defined by both traditional and newly emerging theory, reflecting psychosocial, cognitive, ecological, and student-specific orientations" (p. 5), or the best advising practices are informed by theory supplemented with by research. Raushi further suggested that theory can help advisors understand the student, human growth and development, decision-making, and other factors that shape academic success. For example, academic advisors consume large bodies of information and must apply their knowledge to teach students about degree programs, institutional polices, and academic expectations beyond registering for courses. He argued that basic concepts of persistence, retention, and social integration combine to encourage academic success as students address their academic goals.

In Young-Jones et al. (2013), Burt, a doctoral candidate and former academic advisor, collaborated with Young-Jones (assistant professor), Dixon (instructor and counselor), and Hawthorne (doctoral candidate) to examine the impact of academic advising on student success. This collaboration yielded an exploratory study that found a significant link between six factors relating to advising and classroom success. Two

factors (accountability and empowerment) related to the role of academic advisors, three factors (responsibility, self-efficacy, and study skills) involved students and their personal tasks, and the sixth factor (perceived support) correlated to the advisor and student relationship from entry into the postsecondary institution to degree completion. These authors recommended that academic advisors engage students early, help them to set realistic goals, and deliver meaningful advisement in support of the individual's academic and career aspirations, as did a later study by Ghosh and Fouad (2016).

Best practices suggest that well designed academic programs and services will help advisors learn to connect students to positive experiences (CAS, 2014). The informational, conceptual, and relational components of training and development promote quality academic advising and empowering interactions (Drake et al., 2013). Competencies in all three areas prepare advisors to address the educational and professional needs of their students (CAS, 2014; Hughey & Pettay, 2013). Working together, both advisors and their advisees are better equipped to challenge themselves and to learn in creative ways. The deeper understanding of institutional requirements, theories, and dynamic relationships with an impact on academic persistence guides student success (Kimball & Campbell, 2013). Moreover, military students in this study desired well-defined support systems and expressed a low tolerance for unclear direction (Barry et al., 2014) because it creates disorienting dilemmas that are misaligned with their educational goals (Wilson & Smith, 2012). The implementation of quality academic programs and services at UNYC can create better opportunities to support military students and continually work to develop the skills of the advisors who work with them.

Support for Military Students

In developing the white paper, I also revisited studies about diverse student populations. As previously indicated, military students are both nontraditional students and adult learners who experience unique challenges in higher education (Arminio et al., 2015). At least four of the participants in this study attended a community college during the early stages of their college careers and later transferred to the online college to earn a bachelor's degree. Since data that represent the results of efforts to accurately identify and track service members and veterans across academic institutions are not available, I drew information from multiple sources relating to the experiences of multicultural populations, transfer students, and veteran students to piece together information to describe this diverse population.

Expanding on the ideas presented in the peer-reviewed journal edited by King, Garing (1993) stated that advisors who engage in intrusive advising reach out to students at critical points of enrollment to graduation. This proactive strategy enables advisors to acknowledge student success, show concern without intruding, and inform future practices (Garing, 1993). Recognizing changes in the academic landscape and demographic shifts in higher education, Garing noted that proactive advising (formerly intrusive advising) in the online environment is similar to a traditional college setting, in terms of strategies or timing (M. Garing, personal communication, July 31, 2015). She further noted that

> The strategies I use to connect with service members or veterans include a sincere understanding of their background, circumstances, and environment in

> conjunction with their educational/academic goals. Service members and veterans bring their culture and training with them–it is a part of their personality and style of communication–and it is important that I, as an academic advisor, incorporate that understanding with my advising strategies. My five years spent solely advising military students also helped since I had become very familiar with the military "language," meaning military documents, ratings and occupational specialties, and deployments. (M. Garing, personal correspondence, August 5, 2015)

Articles published in *New Directions for Community Colleges*, and personal communication with Garing prompted me to include recommendations for flexible advising strategies, military culture awareness, and on-going training linked to intentional practices and individual student needs in my white paper.

In order to address the unique needs of military students, my white paper contains information about the needs military students (Persyn & Polson, 2012), community reintegration (Smith-Osborne, 2012), jobless rate of veterans (BLS, 2013), best practices to close the achievement gap (Osborne, 2014), and career transitions (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016). Each researcher cited contributed to an understudied area of study and enabled me to inform others about the importance of supporting military students in the pursuit of a higher education and future employment.

An understanding of military students and their perceived needs can help advisors develop consistency and competency in dealing with them. The participants in this study were determined to plan ahead and acquire critical skills demanded in the civilian

workforce (Wilson & Smith, 2012). Of the 13 participants, 10 were active duty service members, two veterans held civilian jobs, and one veteran was unemployed. The majority balanced school, work, and life responsibilities while attending UNYC. Even though they had served in the military for between 5 and 30 years, their knowledge and military experience alone did not prepare them for civilian jobs or careers that require a college degree.

Academic advisors undoubtedly play a critical role in encouraging students to achieve their educational and career goals (Young-Jones et al., 2013). Yet, military students' ability, their willingness to do what is required, and the choices they make are three elements of persistence that advisors need to understand if they are to help increase persistence at the online college. By immersing myself in the literature, conducting interviews, and analyzing academic documents, I gained a deeper understanding of the participants' persistence and the choices or decisions they have made to earn a college degree and thereby increase their potential for future employment. The white paper is an appropriate genre for reporting the findings to inform others about issues that must be addressed and inspire decision-makers to take actions aimed at helping military students complete their educational and life goals.

Implementation

Designing and writing the white paper presented in this study was the mechanism used to apply what was learned in the project study to support decision-making at UNYC. The white paper was designed to promote academic success, support service members and veterans, and create greater opportunities for workforce professional development.

Recommendations are made to address the problem of military students leaving college prior to earning a bachelor's degree. Once this project study is approved, I will deliver the white paper to the site's operating officer who also serves as the executive director of the military education office to be shared with others as she sees fit. I also expect to reformat the results of the study for publication.

Potential Resources, Existing Supports, and Potential Barriers

This project study was designed to promote efforts to enhance educational attainment, support service members and veterans, and educate both military students and those academic professionals who work with them. Through collaborative efforts, trained professionals can deliver consistent and high quality services in support of military students who aspire to earn a college degree and prepare for employment in the civilian workforce. This kind of information can be useful in overcoming barriers military students encounter and improve graduation rates in this population.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Once this project study is approved, I will meet with the site's operation officer to discuss the findings and next steps that might be taken. I will offer my assistance in developing a presentation within the center's webinar series, develop a standalone webinar, or support other suitable professional development initiatives as she deems appropriate.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

Meeting with the site's operating officer offers an excellent opportunity for me to communicate key findings about military students' persistence in earning a bachelor's

degree at the online college. I will use the white paper to show that academic success is more likely when professional advisors and advisees develop positive relationships that stimulate growth. My hope is that the site's operations member will read the white paper and consider its content in making decisions about helping military students accomplish their goals, training academic professionals, and promoting quality education for all stakeholders.

Project Evaluation

The study institution wants to increase the persistence of military students who historically fail to complete their undergraduate degree programs. The resultant white paper addressed the problem of military students not continuing their programs of study until graduation. My recommendations are aimed at increasing the persistence of military students and the overall persistence rate at the online college. The overall goal of this evaluation is to determine if the recommended annual training sessions, basic military training webinars, or professional development activities could lead academic professionals to create meaningful student interactions and conditions that promote academic success for military students. I believe the project will be a success if key decision-makers pay attention to this study and the recommendations coming from it, especially if my recommendations influence appropriate change and lead to additional studies as the program continues to develop.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

This study resulted in a project that has implications for increasing the persistence of military students at UNYC. The white paper details how training and development help academic professionals learn to support military students in their educational and career endeavors. The content of the white paper was informed by the findings, theories, and literature concerning military students' perception of time, commitment, and self-efficacy; missions; and a need for academic professionals and instructors to support service members and veterans in their persistence to degree. The four recommendations presented in the white paper promote quality education and the professional development of both military students and those professionals who work with this unique student population. Helping a larger percentage of military students acquire college degrees can do much to help these individuals transition to civilian life and enhance their capacity to both improve their situations and contribute more to society. At the same time, it can ensure that taxpayers get value for the benefits the government provides to these men and women.

Far-Reaching Objectives

The research findings presented in this study may encourage other college officials and academic leaders to implement best practices aimed at helping service members and veterans complete their college degrees both online and in face to face classrooms. I focused on giving voice to military students who described their enrollment patterns, persistence behaviors, and intent to graduate in spite of the complex

situations they encountered. Knowledge gained from the 13 participants could potentially benefit to other service members and veterans at UNYC and elsewhere, support academic success, and promote the professional development of those who work with this unique student population. Persistence to degree can provide military students with the educational credentials they need to translate their knowledge and training from the military into high-level skills that civilian employers value.

Conclusion

Section 3 began with an introduction of the white paper project, which contained the description of the project, its goals, rationale, literature review, implementation, project evaluation, and implications for social change. The white paper includes an executive summary, the problem, significance, description of adult learning and persistence, purpose, themes, findings, recommendations, closing thoughts, and references. I developed the white paper to convey important information about military students' persistence, increase the awareness of military culture, and present professional development opportunities for both students and academic professionals at the online college. The white paper was the chosen genre because it offered the greatest flexibility and enabled me to address the problem of persistence in a report that informs others about the research findings. The study and the white paper have implications for social change at the local level. They might also be of value to other stakeholders who are trying to serve this population and those who study at their academic institutions. The information offered can guide efforts to enhance services to military students and develop professional development programs for those doing providing those services.

Finally, Section 4 details my reflections and conclusions about the project study. I describe the project's strengths and make recommendations to remediate the limitations identified in the study. I share my lessons learned about scholarship, project development and evaluation, leadership, and social change. Section 4 concludes this project study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

Section 4 is an overview of my reflections on this project study. I conducted interviews with 13 military students who helped me better understand their time to degree, the impact of the multiple commitments they had to address as military students, and their tendencies to power through complex situations rather than ask for help. This insight led me to develop a white paper guided by the findings, theories, and a review of the literature. I reflect on this new knowledge in order to discuss the project's strengths and limitations and will share the lessons I learned about scholarship, project development and evaluation, leadership, and social change. Given that professional literature on military students' persistence is scarce, I will also present information on the implications and suggest opportunities for future research based on my work.

Project Strengths

The project's main strengths lay in its reporting of the voices of military students. I chose semistructured interviews to give voice to service members and veterans who are often silenced in the professional literature, original studies, and peer-reviewed journals. This study included direct comments from service members and veterans expressed in their own words. This has value in that it can present opinions of those who UNYC serves and help academic professionals gain a deeper understanding of both common and unique student experiences at the online college. During the one-on-one interviews, I followed a basic qualitative research design, listening to military students who were currently connected to the online college and had persisted in their undergraduate degree

programs. This emergent design guided me to identify and holistically explain military students' perseverance, autonomy, and diverse cultural perspectives. In addition, journaling helped me remain neutral in the course of the research and allow military students to interpret their own experiences and shape the findings.

Other strengths of the project include validation strategies. I became very familiar with the data and developed a detailed portrait of institutional, situational, and dispositional factors that military students believed to have had an impact on their time to degree completion. Research conducted by Holder (2007) supports the belief that institutional (policies and procedures), situational (work, family, and social obligations), and dispositional (age and past experiences) factors impact students' persistence both positively and negatively. By combining data extracted from the interviews, demographic surveys, and document analysis, I gained a deeper understanding of military students' persistence as well as stoppages in most (n = 7) of their online degree programs. In a similar fashion, the peer reviewer's analysis of the interview data revealed concepts of time and time management strategies that military students used to budget their time. Finally, using more than one data collection method and multiple sources of information produced a fuller picture of three data-driven themes: (a) Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, (b) Determination to Accomplish Missions, and (c) The Call for Military Culture Awareness.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

In the course of this study, I learned the importance of using a first stage inquiry to get acquainted with service members and veterans, explore persistence to degree, and

then address the problem of military students stopping short of earning a degree at the online college. This is exploratory work was designed primarily to explore broadly and deeply the unique situation in which military students find themselves on campus and the unique challenges they face as they work towards a degree. Because there is much to learn about the military student population, this should be viewed as the beginning of research into the efforts of this population. While a single webinar will not completely fulfill the need for professional development in this area at UNYC, it can begin a conversation leading to additional fact finding. One way to address the need for training is to integrate military topics into a series of training events or in a campus professional development plan. I recommend establishing planning committees, promoting collaboration across the college, and seeking in-house subject matter experts who can speak on relevant topics either to directly support military students in the online environment or that touch on this group as part of the larger population on campus. This strategy limits the need for hiring external consultants and increases the likelihood that topics presented will be specifically tailored to meet the needs of both military students and those who work with this population at UNYC.

It might also be useful to develop annual retreats to further develop the knowledge base and skills of academic professionals, faculty, and others who work with military students. Other participants might include both internal and external professionals who are knowledgeable about effective strategies to create meaningful student interactions and conditions that promote academic success for military students. The retreats could present opportunities for academic professionals to connect to this

important student population and really look beyond the demographics housed in the student information system. Long-term plans can help academic professionals build competencies and extend advising beyond clerical functions towards a holistic approach to support service members, veterans, and their family members who pursue a degree at the online college.

Scholarship

Through this doctoral study, I experienced transformational learning. My learning experiences helped me to transform ideas about andragogy into a study of military students' persistence in earning a degree at the online college. The degree requirements for a specialization in Higher Education and Adult Learning motivated me to become a better educator, academic advisor, and learner. I acquired reliable information to achieve these goals. During this process, scholarly articles, journals, and books became my primary source of information. These new discoveries led me to examine myself as an adult learner. I relearned to locate, critically evaluate, and apply new knowledge in different learning situations. Purposeful queries led me to study topics about military students, read with a purpose, and analyze material to select the most appropriate research. I used research to inform practice and shape my own knowledge in the field of education.

Project Development and Evaluation

Project development is a time-consuming endeavor. I returned to the data and revisited the literature to build a project that aligned with the research, themes, and findings of my study. I invested time in this project to educate myself and others about

the problem of military students stopping short of earning a college degree. Research showed quality academic advising contributed to positive student experiences and outcomes. Further, academic advising is a process rather than a one-time event. As a result, I shifted my focus from the development of a basic military training webinar to a white paper, which includes recommendations to help build the knowledge and skills of those professionals who work with military students. Since the study provided a better understanding of service members' and veterans' experiences at the online college, the white paper can introduce opportunities to improve services to those who support military students and further develop the competencies of advisors, counselors, and others who serve this important student population. The white paper is research-based. Therefore, decision-makers might consider the recommendations made in the white paper more readily than a single-focused webinar, lengthy research paper, or directive.

Leadership and Change

The landscape of higher education continues to change (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). I continually prepare for upward mobility and stand ready to lead change. In other words, I continually find ways to use skills drawn from my prior experiences in the military, human resources management studies, adjunct faculty role, and academic advising to help me to adapt to changing environments. For this reason, leaders in the past have entrusted me with launching and recovering aircraft, managing resources, facilitating a success strategy course, and advising students in multiple learning environments. In conducting this study, I have reflected on these roles to stress the importance of education because my career trajectory could have been different for four

reasons: (a) the phase out of the A-4 Skyhawk aircraft, (b) expansion of human resources information technology, (c) growth in online degree programs, and (d) demographic shifts in the military and higher education. My continued learning enabled me to develop new knowledge, skill sets, and ideas to achieve academic and career success. Life-long learning has led me to earn two master's degrees, pursue this doctoral degree, and prepare for the ever-changing demands in today's society.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I am a life-long learner who understands the importance to develop research skills rather than make faulty assumptions based on outdated material. While I learned about andragogy at the undergraduate level and applied the knowledge in graduate school, I had focused on foundational knowledge and primarily applied the knowledge acquired to complete course assignments. This doctoral process, however, offered opportunities for me to apply new knowledge to real-world situations. As a scholar, I considered the work of seminal thinkers like Knowles (1970) and Bandura (1977) and delved deeper into the literature to discover subsequent research, theories, and studies based on their work. I learned important lessons about research that had been conducted in controlled environments and researchers who neglected to observe adults in natural settings. As a novice researcher, this project study helped me gain research skills and contribute to a body of literature that informs practice.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

Administration is my primary profession. However, I became involved in academic advising and aspired to expand my understanding of this part of my role

through my doctoral studies. During this process, I reflected on what drives me as a professional. I care about my success because it motivates me to support students as they work to attain both life and educational goals. On the other hand, I struggle with the idea that academic advising is not a profession. Instead, advisors are professionals who typically focus on their jobs rather than research, and most studies about advising are conducted by researchers who do not work as academic advisors. While research has shaped a variety of academic practices, conversations in higher education still revolve around the problem of students stopping short of earning a college degree. I found it important to be a resource and promote academic success for underserved student populations. Therefore, my knowledge and professional experience have inspired me to speak at symposiums, webinars, workshops, job fairs, and other venues. I believe it is up to me, the practitioner, to continually undertake research within the academic advising community to find better ways to empower students to complete a college degree.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

In order for me to develop this project, I had to generate new knowledge. My goal was to learn about participants' experiences with persistence and then educate others. I asked participants about factors that they believe had an impact on their persistence in earning a degree at the online college. Once the 13 participants answered the interview questions, I gained an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and created the white paper to transfer knowledge to stakeholders at the college. The first-hand knowledge presented practical opportunities for me to understand factors that military students believed to have had an impact on their persistence, discover needs, and

develop a project that addressed a real problem. I discovered theories, research, and other studies that helped me anchor the project to goals, objectives, and evaluation plans designed to support military students and build critical skills within the college.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

Being a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces, I can relate to many experiences shared by the participants in this study. I have researched persistence, collected data, and reported the findings of this study to help decision-makers address the problem of military students stopping short of degree completion. The service members and veterans shared a wide range of experiences that suggest there is no single approach to guide military students toward degree completion. Instead, it is essential for academic professionals and educators to be aware of military students' diverse needs, collaborate with colleagues, and use best practices to meet various needs. The findings highlighted many opportunities for advisors, faculty, and others to take appropriate actions to help develop an educated military force and graduates who are career-ready. Academic professionals, leaders, and other stakeholders at UNYC (and elsewhere, if adjustments are made to accommodate local situations) who apply this qualitative study to current and new military students can potentially increase the college-wide persistence rate, prepare veterans for future employment opportunities, and build skilled academic communities within higher education.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

After many frustrating searches in online library databases, I learned that military students and their persistence to degree are not adequately addressed or fully understood

in the literature. This discovery motivated me to readjust my thinking, practices, and commitment to advance an understudied area of academia. Similar to the 13 participants in this study, I experienced my own challenges with persistence and refused to stop short of completing my online degree program. I am grateful to the participants who selflessly volunteered to participate in this study. Each participant positively contributed to my understanding of this topic, my ability to apply learning to real situations, and military students' persistence to degree. Learning is a continuous process. I enthusiastically present the findings of this qualitative study to promote research, understanding, and purposeful actions, especially for those academic professionals who work with military students.

Conclusion

In this section, I reflected on the project's potential in helping to develop a comprehensive picture of institutional, situational, and dispositional factors that appeared to impact persistence. Similar to all research studies, there were limitations identified in this project study. It is not possible to fully cover the topic of military students in a single paper, webinar, or professional development activity. Therefore, I made recommendations to address the problem differently by integrating military topics into a series of training events or professional development plan. My lessons learned are provided in a self-analysis as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. The self-analyses guided me to consider the potential impact on social change, important implications, utility of the study, and opportunities for future research. I developed a white paper to inform academic professionals, leaders, and other stakeholders of the

findings and recommendations concerning military students' persistence. The findings highlighted many opportunities for advisors, faculty, and others to take appropriate actions and help develop an educated military force and graduates who are career-ready. These purposefully designed actions are reflective of significant learning experiences that linked the doctor of education courses and learning activities to real-world situations. The findings show not all who serve or have served in the military are the same, and support services must be personalized to guide all students toward degree completion.

References

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2015). *Grade level: Tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group Report. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradelevel.pdf

Almeida, D. J. (2016). Understanding grit in the context of higher education. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, 31*, 559-609. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-268293-3

American Council on Education (ACE). (2011). *Promising practices in veterans' education: Outcomes and recommendations from the success for veterans award grants.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Promising-Practice-in Veterans-Education.pdf

American Council on Education (ACE). (2015). *ACE's 2015 service member and veteran academic advising summit report.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/2015-Veterans-Programs-Summit-Report.pdf

Arminio, J., Grabosky, T. K., & Lang, J. (2015). *Student veterans and service members in higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191-215. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Bandura, A. (2012). On the functional properties of perceived self-efficacy revisited. *Journal of Management, 38*(12), 9-44. doi:10.1177/0149206311410606

Barry, A. E., Whiteman, S. D., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2014). Student service members/veterans in higher education: A systematic review. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 51*(1), 30-42. doi: 10.1515/jsarp-2014-0003

Barry, A. E., Whiteman, S. D., & Wadsworth, S. M. (2012). Implications of posttraumatic stress among military-affiliated and civilian students. *Journal of American College Health, 60*(8), 562-573. doi:10.1080/07448481.2012.721427

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research, 55*(4), 485-540. doi:10.3102/00346543055004485

Boermans, S. M., Kamhuis, W., Delahaij, R., Korteling, J., & Euwem, M. C. (2013). Perceived demands during modern military operations. *Military Medicine, 178*(7), 722-728. doi:10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00463

Bonar, T. C., & Domenici, P. L. (2011). Counseling and connecting with military undergraduate: The intersection of military service and university life. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 25*(3), 204-219. doi:10.1080/87568225.2011.581925

Boston, W. E., Ice, P., & Gibson, A. M. (2011). Comprehensive assessment of student retention in online learning environments. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 4*(1). Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring141/boston_ice_gibson141.pdf

Bowen, G. L., & Martin, J. A. (2011). The resiliency model of role performance for service members, veterans, and their families: A focus on social connections and

individual assets. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 21*, 162-178. doi:10.1080/10911359.2011.546198

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Brown, P. A., & Gross, C. (2011). Serving those who have served – managing veteran and military student best practices. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(1), 45-49. doi:10.1080/07377363.2011.544982

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). (2013, March 20). *Economic news release: Employment situation of veterans news release.* Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.htm

Callahan, R., & Jarrat, D. (2014). Helping student servicemembers and veterans succeed. *Change, 46*(2), 36-41. doi:10.1080/00091383.2014.897189

Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2012*). Recovery: Job growth and educational requirements through 2020*. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University. Retrieved from https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_.Web_.pdf

Cass, D., & Hammond, S. (2015). Bridging the gap: Technology and veteran academic success. *Online Learning Journal, 19*(1), 84-91. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1061485)

Castro, C. A., Kintzle, S., & Hassan, A. M. (2015). The combat veteran paradox: Paradoxes and dilemmas encountered with reintegrating combat veterans and the agencies that support them. *Traumatology, 21*(4), 299-310. doi:10.1037/trm0000049

Chenail, R. J. (2011). Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research. *Qualitative Report, 16*(1), 255-262. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss1/16

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Daly, M. E., & Sidell, N. I. (2013). Assessing academic advising: A developmental approach. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, 18*, 37-49. doi:10.5555/basw.18.1.v17k210462318075

Davenport, J., & Davenport, J. A. (1985). A chronology and analysis of andragogy debate. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35*(3), 71-159. doi: 10.1177/0001848185035003004

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES). (2011). DoD Voluntary Education Fact Sheet FY 2002 retrieved from http://www.dantes.doded.mil/Sub%20Pages/Resources/Docs/FactSheetArchive.pdf

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES). (2012). DoD Voluntary Education Fact Sheet FY 2011 retrieved from

http://www.dantes.doded.mil/Sub%20Pages/Resources/Docs/Fact_Sheet_FY11.pdf

Delahaij, R., Kamphuis, W., & van den Berg, C. E. (2016). Keeping engaged during deployment: The interplay between self-efficacy, family support, and threat exposure. *Military Psychology, 28*(2), 78-88. doi:10.1037/mil0000098

Demers, A. L. (2013). From death to life: Female veterans, identity, negotiation, and reintegration into society. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 53*(4), 489-515. doi:10.1177/0022167812472395

Department of Defense (DoD). (2016). Table of active duty females by rank/grade and service. Retrieved from https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp

Department of Education (ED). (2015). 8 keys to veterans' success. Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families/8-keys-success-sites

Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2015). *Demographics and enrollment characteristics on nontraditional undergraduates: 2011-12* (NCES Publication No. 2015-025). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics Web Site: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). (2011). The Post-9/11 GI-Bill. Retrieved from https://www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/post_911_bill/index.html

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). (2016). Profile of women veterans: 2014. Retrieved from http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Women_Veterans_2016.pdf

DiRamio, D., Ackerman, R., & Mitchell, R. L. (2008). From combat to campus: Voices of student-veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 45*(1), 73-102. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1908

DiRamio, D., & Jarvis, K. (Eds.). (2011). Special issue: Veterans in higher education: When Johnny and Jane come marching to campus. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 37*(3), 1-144. doi:10.1002/aehe.3703

DiRamio, D., Jarvis, K., Iverson, S., Seher, C., & Anderson, R. (2015). Out from the shadows: Female student veterans and help-seeking. *College Student Journal, 49*(1), 49-68. Retrieved from Academic Search Complete database.

Drake, J. K., Jordan, P., & Miller, M. A. (Eds.). (2013). *Academic advising approaches: Strategies that teach students to make the most of college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*(6), 1087-1101. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087

Durdella, N., & Kim, Y. K. (2012). Understanding patterns of college outcomes among student veterans. *Journal of Studies in Education, 2*(2), 109-129. doi:10.5296/jse.v2i2.1469

Ellison, M. L., Mueller, L., Smelson, D., Corrigan, P. W., Torres Stone, R. A., Bokhour, B. G., Najavits, L. M., Vessella, J. M., & Drebing, C. (2012). Supporting the education goals of post-9/11 veterans with self-reported PTSD symptoms: A

needs assessment. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 35*(3), 209–217. doi:10.2975/35.3.2012.209.217

Fall, L. T., Kelly, S., & Christen, S. (2011). Revisiting the impact of instructional immediacy: A differentiation between military and civilians. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 12*(3), 199-206. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/docview/920291746?accountid=14872

Fishback, S. J. (2015). Military students and contexts in adult education. *Adult Learning, 26*(3), 91-92. doi:10.1177/1045159515585124

Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ford, K., & Vignare, K. (2015). The evolving military learner population: A review of the Literature. *Online Learning, 19*(1), 7-30. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1061492)

Garing, M. T. (1993). Intrusive academic advising. In M. C. King (1993). Academic advising: Organizing and delivering services for student success. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 82*, 97-104. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED357811)

Ghosh, A., & Fouad, N. A. (2016). Career Transitions of Student Veterans. *Journal of Career Assessment, 24*(1), 99-111. doi:10.1177/1069072714568752

Giannoukos, G., Besas, G., Galiropoulos, C., & Hioctour, V. (2015). The andragogy, the social change and the transformative learning educational approaches in adult

education. *Journal of Education and Practice, 6*(10), 46-50. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1081666)

Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Gordon, M., & Graham, G. (2003). *The art of the whitepaper*. Retrieved from http://www.gordonandgordon.com/downloads/art_of_the_white_paper_2003.pdf

Graham, G. (2014, September). How to generate leads with a white paper: Tips from tech target. Retrieved from https://www.thatwhitepaperguy.com/getting-started-with-white-papers/how-to-generate-leads-with-a-white-paper-tips-from-tech-target/#comment-1750

Griffin, K. A., & Gilbert, C. K. (2015). Better transitions for troops: An application of Schlossberg's transition framework to analyses of barriers and institutional support structures for student veterans. *Journal of Higher Education, 86*(1), 71-97. doi:10.1353/jhe.2015.0004

Habley, W. R., Bloom, J. L., & Robbins, S. (2012). *Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Holder, B. (2007). An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predicators of persistence in higher education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education, 10*(4), 245-260. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2007.08.002

Ice, P., Gibson, A. M., Boston, W., & Becher, D. (2011). An exploration of differences between community of inquiry indicators in low and high disenrollment online courses. Comprehensive assessment of student retention in online learning

environments. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 15*(2), 33-69. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ935576)

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (n.d.). About IPEDS. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/about/

Jones, K. C. (2013). Understanding student veterans in transition. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(74), 1-14. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/jones74.pdf

Johnson, I., & Muse, W. (2012). Student swirl at a single institution: The role of timing and student characteristics. *Research in Higher Education, 53*(2), 152-181. doi:10.1007/s11162-011-9253-0

Juricek, J. E. (2009). Access to grey literature in business: An exploration of commercial white papers. *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship, 14*(4), 318-332. doi:10.1080/08963560802365388

Kemp, A. (2005). White paper writing guide: How to achieve marketing goals by explaining technical ideas. Retrieved from http://www.impactonthenet.com/wp-guide.pdf

Kimball, E., & Campbell, S. (2013). Advising strategies to support student learning success: Linking theory and philosophy with intentional practice. In J. K. Drake, P. Jordan, & M.A. Miller (Eds.), *Academic advising approaches: Strategies that teach students to make the most of college* (pp. 3-16). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

King, M. C. (Ed.). (1993). Academic advising: Organizing and delivering services for student success. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 82*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED357811)

Kirchner, M. J. (2015). Supporting student veteran transition to college and academic success. *Adult Learning, 26*(3), 116-123. doi:10.1177/1045159515583813

Knowles, M. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. New York, NY: Association Press.

Knowles, M. S. (1978). Andragogy: Adult learning theory in perspective. *Community College Review, 5*(9), 9-20. doi:10.1177/009155217800500302

Knowles, M. S. (1989). *The making of an adult educator: An autobiographical journey*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Komarraju, M., & Nadler, D. (2013). Self-efficacy and academic achievement: Why do implicit beliefs, goals, and effort regulation matter? *Learning and Individual Differences, 25*, 67-72. doi: 10.1016/j.lindif.2013.01.005

Lee, Y., & Choi, J. (2011). A review of online course dropout research: Implications for practice and future research. *Educational Technology Research & Development, 59*(5), 593-618. doi:10.1007/s11423-010-9177-y

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (2013). *The constructivist credo.* Walnut Creek: CA: Left Coast Press.

Litchman, M. (2013). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lucke, G. A., & Furtner, M. R. (2015). Soldiers lead themselves to more success: A self-leadership intervention study. *Military Psychology, 27*(5), 311-324. doi:10.1037/mil0000086

Lyons, J. B., & Luginsland, J. W. (2014). White papers and beyond: Reflections from former grants officers. *TIP: The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist, 52*(2), 129-135. Retrieved from http://www.siop.org/tip/oct14/pdfs/Lyons.pdf

Mani, B. G. (2013). The human capital model and federal employees' pay: Gender, veteran status, and occupation. *Gender Issues, 30*(1-4), 15-38. doi:10.1007/s12147-013-9113-7

Maralani, V. (2011). From GED to college: Age trajectories of nontraditional educational paths. *American Educational Research Journal, 48*(5), 1058–1090. doi:10.3102/0002831211405836

Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 65*(3), 267-285. doi:10.1177/0741713615583085

Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A., & Fontenot, R. (2013). Does sample size matter in qualitative research?: A review of qualitative interviews in IS research. *Journal*

of Computer Information Systems, 54(1), 11-22. doi:10.1080/08874417.2013.11645667

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McAllister, C. P., Mackey, J. D., Hackney, K. J., & Perrewé, P. L. (2015). From combat to khakis: An exploratory examination of job stress with veterans. *Military Psychology, 27*(2), 93-107. doi:10.1037/mil0000068

McBain, L., Kim, Y. M., Cook, B. J., & Snead, K. (2012). From soldier to student II: Assessing campus programs for veterans and service members. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

NASPA Research & Policy Institute. (2013). *Measuring the success of student veterans and active duty military students* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.naspa.org/rpi/reports/measuring-the-success-of-student-veterans-and-active-duty-military

O'Herrin, E. (2011). Enhancing veteran success in higher education. *Peer Review, 13*(1), 15-18. Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/enhancing-veteran-success-higher-education

Olsen, T., Badger, K., & McCuddy, M. D. (2014). Understanding the student veterans' college experience: An exploratory study. *U. S. Army Medical Department*

Journal, 101-108. Retrieved from http://www.cs.amedd.army.mil/amedd_journal.aspx

Osborne, N. (2014). Veteran ally: Practical strategies for closing the military-civilian gap on campus. *Innovative Higher Education, 39*(3), 247-260. doi:10.1007/s10755-013-9274-z

Ostovary, F., & Dapprich, J. (2011). Challenges and opportunities of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans with disabilities transitioning into learning and workplace environments. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 132*, 63-73. doi:10.1002/ace.432

Pargament, K. I., & Sweeney, P. J. (2011). Building spiritual fitness in the Army: An innovative approach to a vital aspect of human development. *American Psychologist, 66*(1), 58-64. doi:10.1037/a0021657

Pascarella, E. T., Salisbury, M. H., & Blaich, C. (2011). Exposure to effective instruction and college student persistence: A multi-institutional replication and extension. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*(1), 4-19. doi:10.1353/csd.2011.0005

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pellegrino, L., & Hoggan, C. (2015). A tale of two transitions: Female military veterans during their first year at community college. *Adult Learning, 26*(3), 124-131. doi:10.1177/1045159515583257

Persky, K. R., & Oliver, D. E. (2011). Veterans coming home to the community college: Linking research to practice. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, *35*(1-2), 111-120. doi:10.1080/10668926.2011.525184

Persyn, J. M., & Polson, C. J. (2012). Evolution and influence of military adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 136*, 5-16. doi:10.1002/ace.20031

Petrovich, J. (2012). Culturally competent social work practice with veterans: An overview of the U.S. military. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 22*, 863-874. doi:10.1080/10911359.2012.707927

Petty, T., & Thomas, C. C. (2014). Approaches to a successful adult education program. *College Student Journal, 48*(3), 473-480. Retrieved from Academic Search Complete database.

Powell, V. (2012). Revival of the position paper: Aligning curricula and professional competencies. *Communication Teacher, 26*(2), 96-103. doi:10.1080/17404622.2011.643805

Radford, W. A., Bentz, A., Dekker, R., & Paslov, J. (2016). *After the Post-9/11 GI Bill: A profile of military service members and veterans enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education*. Stats in Brief. NCES 2016-435. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2016435

Rausch, M. (2014). Contextual career counseling for transitioning military veterans. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 51*, 89-96. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1920.2014.00044.x

Raushi, T. M. (1993). Developmental academic advising. In M. King (Ed.). *New Directions for Community Colleges, 82*, 5-19. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED357811)

Reeves, T. J., Miller, L. A., & Rouse, R. A. (2011). *Reality check: A vital update to the landmark 2002 NCES study on nontraditional college students*. Retrieved from http://apolloresearchinstitute.com/reality_check_report_final_0.pdf

Richardson, T. M., Ruckert, J. M., & Marion, J. W. (2015). Planning for veterans' success: The degree map as an advising solution. *Online Learning, 19*(1), 64-80. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1061491)

Robbins, R. (2012). Everything you have always wanted to know about academic advising (well, almost). *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 26*, 216-226. doi:10.1080/87568225.2012.685855

Roksa, J., & Velez, M. (2012). A late start: Delayed entry, life course transitions and bachelor's degree completion. *Social Forces, 90*(3), 769-794. doi:10.1093/sf/sor018

Romero, D. H., Riggs, S. A., & Ruggero, C. (2015). Coping, family social support, and psychological symptoms among student veterans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62*(2), 242-252. doi:10.1037/cou0000061

Routon, P. (2014). The effect of 21st century military service on civilian labor and educational outcomes. *Journal of Labor Research, 35*(1), 15-38. doi:10.1007/s12122-013-9170-4

Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education, 6*, 1-16. doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00158-6

Rumann, C. B., & Hamrick, F. A. (2010). Student veterans in transition: Re-enrolling after war zone deployments. *Journal of Higher Education, 81*(4), 431-458. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0103

Sallee, M. W., & Flood, J. T. (2012). Using qualitative research to bridge research, policy, and practice. *Theory into Practice, 51*, 137-144. doi:10.1080/00405841.2012.662873

Schulte, M. (2015). Stopout, swirl, double-dip, and dropout: Attempting to understand student enrollment patterns. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 63*(2), 133-135. doi:10.1080/07377363.2015.1043001

Seidman, A. (Ed.). (2012). *College student retention: Formula for student success* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC). (2012). *Educational attainment: Tracking the academic success of servicemembers and veterans* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://assets.system.tamus.edu/files/veterans/pdf/symposium-presentations/SOC-EDUCATIONAL-ATTAINMENT-Final.pdf

Simone, S. A. (2014). *Transferability of postsecondary credit following student transfer or coenrollment*. Statistical Analysis Report. NCES 2014-163. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED546652)

Smart, K. L., Witt, C., & Scott, J. P. (2012). Toward learner-centered teaching: An inductive approach. *Business Communication Quarterly, 75*(4), 392-403. doi:10.1177/1080569912459752

Smith-Osborne, A. M. (2012). Supporting resilience in the academic setting for student soldiers and veterans as an aspect of community reintegration: The design of the student veteran project study. *Advances in Social Work, 13*(1), 34-50. Retrieved from https://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/advancesinsocialwork/article/view/1870/1953

Staley, D. J., & Trinkle, D. A. (2011). The changing landscape of higher education. *EDUCAUSE Review, 46*(1), 16-32. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ950779)

Stanley, E. A., Schaldach, J. M., Kiyonaga, A., & Jha, A. P. (2011). Mindfulness-based mind fitness training: A case study of a high-stress predeployment military cohort. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 18*(4), 566-576. doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2010.08.002

Starr-Glass, D. (2011, March). Military learners: Experience in the design and management of online learning environments. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 7*(1), 147-158. Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol9no3/starr-glass_0913.pdf

Stelzner, M. (2010, January). White papers are a valuable asset for every industry. Retrieved from http://www.whitepapernews.com/white-papers-are-a-valuable-asset-for-every-industry-2010-01

Stelzner, M. A. (2007). Writing white papers: How to capture readers and keep them engaged. Retrieved from http://www.writingwhitepapers.com/book/Sample-WritingWhitePapers.pdf

Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. L. (2015). *Introduction to qualitative research: A guidebook and resource* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Thomas, J. L., Adler, A. B., & Castro, C. A. (2005). Measuring operations tempo and relating it to military performance. *Military Psychology, 17*(3), 137-156. doi:10.1207/s15327876mp1703_2

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125. doi:10.3102/00346543045001089

Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*(1), 80-96. doi:10.1177/1473325010368316

Under Secretary of Defense (USD (P&R)). (2011, March). *Voluntary education programs* (DoD Directive 1322.25). Retrieved from http://dodmou.com/Files/DODI%201322%2025%20December%206%202012.pdf

U.S. Coast Guard. (2016). Authorized TA expenses and caps active duty member. Retrieved from http://www.uscg.mil/hr/cgi/active_duty/pay_for_college/ta/caps.asp

Vaccaro, A. (2015). "It's not one size fits all": Diversity among student veterans. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 52*(4), 347-358. doi:10.1080/19496591.2015.1067224

van Dinther, M., Dochy, F., & Segers, M. (2011). Factors affecting students' self-efficacy in higher education. *Educational Research Review, 6*, 95-108. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2010.10.003

Wang, L., Elder, G. H., Jr., & Spence, N. J. (2012). Status configurations, military service and higher education. *Social Forces, 91*(2), 397-422. doi:10.1093/sf/sos174

Wang, X., & McCready, B. (2013). The effect of postsecondary coenrollment on college success: Initial evidence and implications for policy and future research. *Educational Researcher, 42*(7), 392. doi:10.3102/0013189X13505683

Wang, X., & Wickersham, K. (2014). Postsecondary co-enrollment and baccalaureate completion: A look at both beginning 4-year college students and baccalaureate aspirants beginning at community colleges. *Research in Higher Education, 55*(2), 166-195. doi: 10.1007/s11162-013-9317-4.

Wells, R. S., & Lynch, C. M. (2012). Delayed college entry and the socioeconomic gap: Examining the roles of student plans, family income, parental education, and

parental occupation. *Journal of Higher Education, 83*(5), 671-697. doi:10.1353/jhe.2012.0028

Willerton, R. (2012). Teaching white papers through client projects. *Business Communication Quarterly, 76*(1), 105-113. doi:10.1177/1080569912454713

Wilson, K., & Smith, N. (2012). Understanding the importance of life mission when advising soldiers. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education, 136*, 65-75. doi:10.1002/ace.20036

Wilson, K. B., Smith, N. L., Lee, A. L., & Stevenson, M. A. (2013). When the Army post is the campus: Understanding the social and academic integration of soldiers attending college. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(6), 628-642. doi:10.1353/csd.2013.0087

Young-Jones, A. D., Burt, T. D., Dixon, S., & Hawthorne, M. J. (2013). Academic advising: Does it really impact student success? *Quality Assurance in Education, 21*(1), 7-19. doi:10.1108/09684881311293034

Yusuf, M. (2011). The impact of self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and self-regulated learning strategies on students' academic achievement. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 15*, 2623-2626. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.04.158

Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*, 82-91. doi:10.1006/ceps.199.1016

Zinger, L., & Cohen, A. (2010). Veterans returning from war into the classroom: How can colleges be better prepared to meet their needs. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, *3*(1), 39-51. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1072581)

Appendix A: The Project White Paper

Military Students' Persistence

in

Earning an Online Degree

A White Paper by A. Renay Williams

Executive Summary

Since the 1940s, the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs have collectively invested billions of dollars in higher education for service members and veterans. However, having enough money to pay for college was found not to guarantee degree completion. A basic qualitative study was conducted to gain insight into the factors that military students perceive to have an impact on their persistence in earning an online college degree. Using demographic surveys, status reports and degree plans, and semistructured telephone interviews, data were collected from 13 military students. The conceptual framework for the study was Knowles' principles of andragogy, which are based on a humanistic approach to addressing the needs of adult learners.

The research questions included one central question and four subquestions in alignment with the research problem and the purpose of the study:

What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree?

RQ1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs?

RQ4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs?

Situated in the composite model of persistence and andragogy, the findings showed 3 major themes: (a) Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, (b) Determination to Accomplish Missions, and (c) The Call for Military Culture Awareness. The findings and recommendations from the study are included in this paper.

Implications for social change are that military students will be better prepared for more career opportunities and help mitigate the unemployment rates, financial difficulties, and homelessness problems that disproportionately impact veterans.

The Problem

Military students have a growing presence in online degree programs, and during academic year 2011-2012, an estimated 181,264 (or 16%) of these adult learners attended an academic institution solely online compared to 9% of their nonmilitary peers (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, & Paslov, 2016). In spite of the growth in online degree programs, far too many adult learners do not persist to degree completion (Brown & Gross, 2011). This persistence problem pertains to military students, to include active duty members of the United States (U.S.) Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, Reservists, men and women serving in the National Guard, and veterans who have been released from the U.S. Armed Forces.

Nationally, college officials have reported that many military students start online education programs but do not earn a college degree (Brown & Gross, 2011; Starr-Glass, 2011). This statement is problematic and might not accurately describe military students' experiences since some college officials do not track military students as they move from one institution of higher education to another (American Council on Education [ACE], 2011).

Three student realities exist in higher education: students who persist, students who leave but persist elsewhere, and students who leave" (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012, p. 4). Transfer students might appear to be non-persisters or college dropouts even as they move on and earn degrees at a different school. Students might continue their education after matriculation, drop into and out of institutions (swirl), simultaneously

take courses at different schools (coenroll), or end their pursuit of a higher education altogether (dropout).

At the local level, this project study presented an opportunity to explore military students' persistence in their online degree programs and the contributions being made to promote academic success and career-readiness.

Significance

Military tuition assistance and GI Bill benefits have drawn millions of civilians to the armed forces for nearly seven decades (Routon, 2014). However, service members' and veterans' degree completion rates remain consistently low and static even though the U.S. Department of Defense has invested millions and the Department of Veterans Affairs billions more in higher education. While military students are eligible for substantial amounts of money for college, the aid provided cannot guarantee that those individuals who enter higher education will leave with a college degree. Military students reportedly experience one of the lowest persistence rates at the college. This project study was needed to gain a deeper understanding of those factors that motivated military students to persist to earn degrees at this online college.

In the U.S. workforce, the 2012 jobless rate for veterans who are 25 years of age or older was higher than the unemployment rate of their nonveteran counterparts (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2013). The lesson here is that military students often acquire a cluster of college credits (Brown & Gross, 2011) and learning experiences that might not result in a 4-year college degree (Routon, 2014). This long-term problem must be understood to help identify the specific needs of military students and to develop

interventions to address those needs. Otherwise, military students will remain unprepared as a group to take their place in a knowledge economy, both because they lack the high-level skills required and the educational credentials demanded to compete in this workforce.

Looking ahead, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2012) anticipated sharp decreases in jobs outside of the military that do not require a college degree. Therefore, low academic persistence or the lack of a degree is potentially significant. This long-term problem must be understood to help identify the specific needs of military students and to develop interventions to address those needs. Otherwise, military students will remain unprepared as a group to take their place in a knowledge economy, both because they lack the high-level skills required and the educational credentials demanded to compete in this workforce.

Adult Learning and Persistence

Researchers believe that no single adult learning theory, model, or set of assumptions can fully explain adult learning. Principles of andragogy are framed in the context of helping adults persist to graduation. Through key concepts of adult learning and adult education, a basic qualitative study was used to explore the experiences of military students who matriculated into this online college and persisted to earn a bachelor's degree. The conceptual framework of the study, drawn from the work of a

variety of authors follows (see Figure 1).

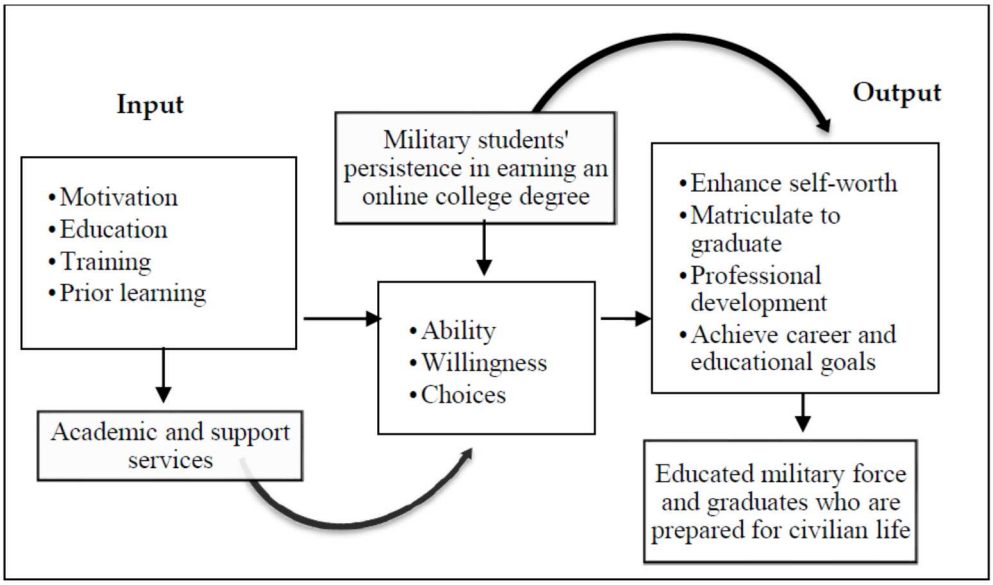


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the study.

Military students and persistence are at the center of the conceptual diagram to illustrate an individual-transactional framework that converges on the learner and different situations. The small center box contains ability, willingness, and choices, three elements of persistence that are not adequately addressed or fully understood in the literature (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Academic and support services are two approaches typically used in higher education to promote student success.

Input. Four descriptors in the input box are key concepts of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Self-actualizers tap into their motivation, education, training, and prior learning experiences to achieve personal growth.

Output. Four descriptors in the output box illustrate some overlapping goals of military students (Persyn & Polson, 2012). Although this is not an exhaustive list, these 4

descriptors inform how education programs are designed to align with the needs and expectations of goal-oriented adult learners to build human capital.

Purpose

The purpose of the basic qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the factors that military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree. The study provided opportunities for further research on this important group of individuals. One central research question and four subquestions, as illustrated, were designed in alignment with the problem of military students stopping short of earning a degree at the online college and the purpose of the study:

What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree?

RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college?

RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs?

RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs?

When approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the college's IRB, criterion sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, was used to identify and select a sample based on the research purpose, a military affiliation, good academic standing, and persistence to the senior year of study. The predetermined criteria were important to collect information-rich data from key informants who could describe their own progress toward degree completion.

Semistructured interviews were a suitable method to ask predetermined and open ended questions to remain focused on the topic. Copies of students' status reports and degree plans provided accurate historical data. These data collection methods were useful because specific areas needed to be covered with 13 participants in a limited amount of time.

Participants

Of the 13 military students who voluntarily consented to participate in this study, 10 were men and 3 were women. Their ages ranged from 25 to 60 years. Demographic information extracted from the student information system showed 8 participants described themselves as white, 3 Hispanic/Latino, and 2 black/African American. Participants served in the Air National Guard, Army, Marine Corps, or Navy, with 77% being active service members (on active duty or in the reserves or National Guard) and 23% being veterans. The participants held various ranks in the military and had completed between 5 and 30 years in service.

Finally, all participants reportedly matched at least one nontraditional student characteristic as broadly defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Participants either reported delayed college enrollment, part-time college attendance, full-time employment, financial independence, and/or parenthood (NCES, 2015).

At the beginning of each interview, participants asked questions, listened to an overview of the interview process, and answered whether or not they would permit a tape recording of the interview. All participants verbally consented to participate in the study and have the interview recorded. The participants also consented to have a copy of their status reports and degree plans provided to the researcher. The interviews and document analysis were needed to study current and past strategies that promoted academic success in students' persistence to earn a degree at the online college.

Data Analysis

The findings were derived from a set of semistructured interviews and an analysis of the participants' status reports and degree plans. Situated in Rovai's (2003) framework of persistence, military students detailed multiple aspects of their ability and willingness to continue their education until graduation. The participants' status reports and degree plans were simultaneously collected and analyzed in the spring of 2015. Interview data were transcribed and all data sources were open coded and thematically analyzed. The findings showed three major themes related to military students' persistence: (a) Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, (b) Determination to Accomplish Missions, and (c) The Call for Military Culture Awareness.

The next subsection describes the emergent themes that were used to refine the understanding of military students' persistence in earning an undergraduate degree at this online college.

Interviews

The first theme, Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy, consisted of consideration of the time military students devote to their academic pursuits.

Theme 1	**Response of the Participant**
Time, Commitment, and Self-efficacy	*Physical effort in time: "…with a recent job I had, I was at work literally almost 16 hours [each day] and even when I went home I was mentally committed to work, thinking about work so I did not take any classes at all during that time. That was a low priority for me at the time."
	*Commitment and time in service: "Well honestly my commitment is to my children so I can provide them with a better life, okay? That is the idea behind my commitment. I want to be able to get my kids the stuff I did not have growing up -- when my time in the service is over."
	*Time management: "I have had to realign priorities and then manage what time I had to associate with …different things that I may want to do other than school. So yeah, a lot of it is time management and just …generally it comes down to just missing sleep.
	*Combat duty: "If you go away …it is a sacrifice on top of a sacrifice [because] you are sacrificing a year or 6 months away from your wife and kids. And then down range, you have got to sacrifice your time to do college on limited sleep."
	*Motivation: "I have persisted on and off based on time. The motivation for me to stay persistent for my degree is that a lot of service members have gotten out [of the military] and they wished they had finished [their degree] beforehand."
	*Self-efficacy: "I have been chasing an undergraduate degree for a long time. I chose to focus. My situations were such that I did not need to work so I chose not to work and focused completely on my studies."

The second theme, Determination to Accomplish Missions, showed that most students relied upon their military training to adapt to different environments and enjoyed the flexible design of online learning. Even as the findings identified commonalities, the 13 military students desired different levels and type of support to complete their online degree programs.

Theme 2	**Response of the Participant**
Determination to Accomplish Missions	*Willpower: "I do not allow myself to have a choice. I have to do it. It's like paying the bills or feeding my kid. It's one of those necessary things. I am not missing out on anything fun. I sit in front of my computer and just knock out my homework." *Balance: "I took one course at a time." * Persistence: "Because I was not working, I was able to make [education] my reason for being. That was my purpose when I woke up in the morning -- to do well on my school work -- to strive to get those four Os and so that is what I did." *Ability: "If it was not at my convenience, then I probably would not be aggressive at my education as I am today." *Grit: "People need a routine. I think our military experience speaks volume to that effect. We do better when we have a schedule and when we know what is expected of us each and every day. I think that comes down to personal grit where you need to make a decision. This is my life, this is what I want out of life, and I am going to sacrifice these moments of pleasure on the computer to sit down and open up Blackboard." *Personal development: "You have to dedicate the time to cracking the books open but coupled with that is keeping a holistic approach to learning. It cannot all be books. It cannot all be goofing off, but you have to mix in time to go give your brain a break."

The third theme, The Call for Military Culture Awareness, related to the need for representatives of the college and instructors to be keenly aware of military culture.

Theme 3	**Response of the Participant**
The Call for Military Culture Awareness	*Military experiences: "I recently took the PTSD course …and personally suffer from PTSD. Taking that course was an actual challenge for me because some of the [material] dealt with military experiences and issues with PTSD in the military. But the steps that I took to push forward were the support of my family of course [and] talking with my instructor." Note: The participant freely shared this personal experience, and there was no more than minimal risk of psychological stress during the interview. *Work and school: "Sometimes I work 18-hour days. So far I've been able to just suck it up and do it." *Active duty orders: "I had to go on active duty so I had requested to submit a post a little early. So I was permitted to do that. Another time I was away at a little bit more of an extended period of time so I did converse with the instructor. She did allow me to do coursework and actually offered suggestions on how I could get the work done and still stay within the rules in terms of posting my work." *Military advisors: "…the military advisors are the key link to …how you are moving on [track]. That is important to me as a military student because it gets me through the track quicker and helps me identify the focus area that I need…." *Duty first: "I do let my job interfere with my commitment to study. My priorities have always been to put myself into work first and then my academics or studies. So whereas I am always willing to [take courses], I am not always ready to take on that additional responsibility."

Theme 3 (cont'd)	**Response of the Participant**
The Call for Military Culture Awareness	*Temporary additional duty (TAD): "I actually have not had as many challenges as other folks, but I have had to drop a couple of courses here and there. I guess you just take it in stride. Most instructors were very flexible, but I was gone for the first week of a class and could not get credit for some of the coursework. I pressed on just knowing that I had to do well in other areas of the course." *Military service school: "...the challenge was mostly during the time I was supposed to be taking a military class but I was already in the middle of taking some classes at school and the college. And instead of dropping the classes I tried to do the two and I did not do as well, but I still finished." *Academic error: "I looked at all of the factors. I kind of did the war gaming -- the `what ifs.' I came to a decision …by applying a military decision making process. But as far as the challenge part, it was just taking that hit, redirecting, and refocusing that energy on understanding that it is going to work out -- kind of keeping a positive attitude." *Frequent travel: "One of the big problems." *Escape through education: "What I experienced when I was down range …gave me an opportunity to get away from combat and experience a piece of reality from back home. Taking classes is a break from your combat operations or whatever it is that you are doing. And then for a minute there -- well actually for about an hour every other night and then a couple of hours on the weekend if you have got the time. You get to escape wherever you are -- Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, or wherever. And you get to leave that area for a short period of time to experience -- oceanography."

Concepts of time connected to the way participants measured their persistence, made decisions, and planned to complete their bachelor's degree programs. All military

students spoke of time, commitment, self-efficacy, and accomplishing missions in the context of earning a degree at the online college.

Documents

The thematic analysis of the participants' status reports and degree plans gave meaning to the story that was embedded in each document: (a) time to degree, (b) persistence, (c) proficiency, (d) independent learning, and (e) military culture. The status reports and degree plans were used to plot military students' movement across institutions and gain more insight into their persistence. The resulting thematic analysis captured the richness of military students' persistence and evolved into the three overarching themes previously discussed. Data in Table 1 illuminated military students' long college careers to include an approximate number of years each student has been in pursuit of a postsecondary education.

Table 1

Military Students' Commitment to Earn a Bachelor's Degree (as of Spring 2015)

Participant (pseudonym)	Year began at first institution	Years in pursuit of a higher education	Total credits remaining to earn a bachelor's degree	Academic status
Ashley	2002	13	8	Enrolled
Bryan	2000	15	9	Enrolled
Charles	1977	38	4	Enrolled
David	2004	11	0	Graduated
Emanuel	1993	22	13	Enrolled
Fernando	2006	9	6	Enrolled
Gregory	2011	4	9	Enrolled
Henry	1981	34	16	Enrolled
Ingrid	1988	27	4	Enrolled
Jayson	1993	22	11	Enrolled
Keisha	2004	11	28	Enrolled
Luke	1992	23	0	Graduated
Matthew	1996	19	0	Graduated

Time to degree clearly varies, in part, because all students had had diverse college careers and planned to persist at their own pace. David, Luke, and Matthew graduated and the remaining students needed 12 or fewer semester credits (n = 7) or planned to complete 13-28 semester credits (n = 3) to earn a bachelor's degree.

The category labeled years in pursuit of a higher education is positive in that it represents historical data and continuance. What is interesting about the years in pursuit of a degree is that all transfer students far exceeded the typical 6-year time to degree completion, and yet these students either graduated or planned to complete their bachelor's degree at their current online college by spring 2016.

Findings and Recommendations

Through semistructured interviews, military students commented on what it means for them to persist despite deployments, TAD assignments, civilian job demands, finances, family and social obligations, academic policies and procedures, inadequate or incorrect information, and past experiences. They also suggested that these factors "did not stop" or end their educational pursuits. All military students believed in their ability to persist regardless of the adverse situations they encountered. The research questions included one central question and four subquestions in alignment with the problem of military students stopping short of earning an online college degree and the purpose of the study. In sum, the following research questions were answered.

Central question: What factors do military students perceive as impacting their persistence in earning an online college degree? Military students identified institutional factors (policies and procedures), situational factors (school, work, and family

obligations), and dispositional factors (age and past experiences) that impact their persistence toward degree completion. At the same time, the students believed that some factors contributed to their academic success: (a) military-friendly policies and procedures, (b) balance between school, work, and family, and (3) maturity gained from real-world experiences.

While the study solely focused on persisters, mixed findings support the idea that a myriad of factors can either advance, slow, or stop military students' academic progress. Findings, supported by the principles of andragogy and the literature review, provided information-rich data and resulted in the recommendations made to address the one central question and the four subquestions answered in the study.

RQ 1: How do military students measure their ability to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college? Military students measure their engagement in academic activities by their ability to remain focused (n = 7); be dutiful in their studies (n = 4); and factors not yet completely resolved (n = 2), though both students remain intent on graduation as time permits.

Recommendation 1: Survey servicemembers and veterans to assess their needs. The assessment should be a positive approach to support military students, ensure programs are mounted to serve students, and further develop the competencies of advisors, counselors, and others who work with this important student population.

RQ 2: How do military students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within their undergraduate programs at the online college? Military

students measure their willingness to remain engaged in academic activities as high because they are always willing to earn a college degree.

However, in spring 2015, the interview data and analysis of students' status reports and degree plans revealed some missed opportunities for military students, advisors, and others to engage in meaningful conversations about course extensions, military withdrawals, time management, and past experiences that advanced, impeded, or stopped students' persistence to degree. The analysis of one students' status report and degree plan showed nearly 4 years of inactivity, which is the approximate length of a service member's tour of duty. The student reportedly experienced willingness, but was not "ready to take on that additional responsibility." The student stopped out of the online college for approximately 4 years, returned in the spring of 2015, and was on track to earn a bachelor's degree by spring 2016.

Recommendation 2: A basic military training webinar for academic professionals should be mounted as a component of the center's webinar series or serve as a standalone session to train and re-train academic advisors, both face-to-face and online. Academic advisors who engage in proactive advising reach out to students at critical points of enrollment to graduation. This proactive strategy enables advisors to acknowledge student success, show concern without intruding, and inform future practices. Training helps academic professionals to learn and apply different skill sets that address the unique situation within which military students persist and the way different situations shape their behaviors. It can also keep advisors abreast of new ideas and changes in the environment and in the community served.

RQ 3: What decisions or choices must military students make to persist in their online degree programs? One student stopped out for nearly 4 years; 6 students took at least one break; and the remaining 6 students refused to stop out of the online college. In most instances, the students strategically plan to complete their educational goals at their own pace rather than be concerned about an artificially set target based on average time to degree. The military students in this study are nontraditional learners who, at times, unintentionally exhibit behaviors and enrollment patterns known to threaten their persistence to degree. But, the majority still show high levels of commitment to persist as can be seen from the responses to questions about their persistence, decisions, and success strategies. Although their behaviors have resembled those of nonpersisters (inactive) or college dropouts (departures), the reality is that these military students have either finished their degrees or are closing in on them.

Recommendation 3: Implement a long-range training plan for professional development. On-going training can enhance workforce professional development through a framework for success when evaluating sources of college credits and advising military students. Quality academic advising connects students to positive experiences. The goal is to (a) honor the commitment to help military students complete their college degrees, (b) promote collaboration across the college, and (c) seek in-house subject matter experts who can speak on relevant topics to support military students in the online environment.

The alternative plan might include both internal and external professionals who are knowledgeable about effective strategies to create meaningful student interactions and conditions that promote academic success for military students.

RQ 4: What strategies do military students consider to be important if they are to persist in their online degree programs? Military students consider time management skills, short- and long-term goals, syllabi reviews, and degree audits important to "plan for, anticipate, and overcome" any challenges. All military students conveyed an orientation to learning that is life-centered and focused on tasks, problems, or challenges. The majority of the participants shared a sense of ownership towards degree completion, performed purposeful tasks, and looked for opportunities to achieve the end goal. These processes are commonly associated with grit or control of one's own education (Almeida, 2016). Participants in this study seldom asked for help even as they encountered life experiences that most college students do not face either inside or outside the college environment. Instead, the military students held optimistic judgments about their capabilities and performed a designated level of academic activities to earn a college degree.

Recommendation 4: Create and share common answers in the student information system to ensure on-time delivery of accurate and consistent information across the college. Skill acquisition is critical to support staff who seek answers when information is not readily available. The overreliance on the capacity of military students to find their own way through higher education represents a failure to support them in

their educational pursuits and leaves them vulnerable to prematurely depart academic institutions before they earn their college degrees.

Closing Thoughts

The qualitative study and white paper were designed to help academic professionals better understand the persistence of military students within online learning environments. Thirteen military students imparted knowledge about military commitments, operations, and values that are least understood within higher education. In most instances, military students strategically planned to complete their educational mission at their own pace rather than be concerned about the average time to degree. The white paper and qualitative study are aligned with military students' perceived needs, professional development initiatives, and the keys to success.

The findings show not all who serve or have served in the military are the same and support services must be personalized to guide all students toward degree completion. This is evident in that some participants spoke about the personalized support they received to manage various situational, dispositional, and institutional factors that interrupted their pursuit of a higher education. Others preferred to power through some complex situations rather than ask for help. Persistence in earning a college degree helps military students become educated citizens who are career-ready and better prepared for both their military careers and civilian life after discharge.

There is still much to gain from a better understanding of military culture and military-affiliated students. Without further research, military students will continue to be underserved and maintain some unmet educational needs. The implications for

positive social change will be a reduction in the gap between college enrollments and degree completions to expand military students' career opportunities and readiness for civilian life. The gap reduction will help military students to be better prepared for more career opportunities and help lessen the unemployment rates, financial difficulties, and homelessness problems that disproportionately impact veterans.

References

Almeida, D. J. (2016). Understanding grit in the context of higher education. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, 31*, 559-609. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-268293-3

American Council on Education (ACE). (2011). *Promising practices in veterans' education: Outcomes and recommendations from the success for veterans award grants.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Promising-Practice-in Veterans-Education.pdf

Brown, P. A., & Gross, C. (2011). Serving those who have served – managing veteran and military student best practices. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(1), 45-49. doi:10.1080/07377363.2011.544982

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). (2013, March 20). Economic news release: Employment situation of veterans news release. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.htm

Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2012*). Recovery: Job growth and educational requirements through 2020*. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University. Retrieved from https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ Recovery2020.FR_.Web_.pdf

Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2015). *Demographics and enrollment characteristics on nontraditional undergraduates:*

2011-12 (NCES Publication No. 2015-025). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics Web Site: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf

Habley, W. R., Bloom, J. L., & Robbins, S. (2012). *Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, I., & Muse, W. (2012). Student swirl at a single institution: The role of timing and student characteristics. *Research in Higher Education, 53*(2), 152-181. doi:10.1007/s11162-011-9253-0

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Persyn, J. M., & Polson, C. J. (2012). Evolution and influence of military adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 136*, 5-16. doi:10.1002/ace.20031

Radford, W. A., Bentz, A., Dekker, R., & Paslov, J. (2016). *After the Post-9/11 GI Bill: A profile of military service members and veterans enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education*. Stats in Brief. NCES 2016-435. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2016435

Routon, P. (2014). The effect of 21st century military service on civilian labor and educational outcomes. *Journal of Labor Research, 35*(1), 15-38. doi:10.1007/s12122-013-9170-4

Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education, 6*, 1-16. doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00158-6

Starr-Glass, D. (2011, March). Military learners: Experience in the design and management of online learning environments. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 7*(1), 147-158. Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol9no3/starr-glass_0913.pdf

Appendix B: Demographic Sheet

Age

What is your age? _____

Gender

What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

Race/Ethnicity

How do you describe yourself? (please select the option(s) that best describe you)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian or Asian American
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino/Latina
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ More than one race (specify): _____

Degree(s) completed:

- ☐ Associate
- ☐ Baccalaureate

If you are currently serving in the U.S. Armed Services, please select the service branch:

☐ Army – Regular	Marines – Regular	Coast Guard – Regular
☐ Army – Reserves	Marines – Reserves	Coast Guard – Reserves
☐ Navy – Regular	Air Force – Regular	National Guard – Army
☐ Navy – Reserves	Air Force – Reserves	National Guard – Air

Military Rank: _____ Years of Service: _____

Other military status

- ☐ Military veteran

Military Rank: _____ Years of Service: _____

Appendix C: Oral Consent Script

Study Title: A Qualitative Study of Military Students' Persistence in Earning an Online College Degree
Researcher: Aysel "Renay" Williams

Hello. My name is Renay Williams. I am conducting interviews about military students' experiences in earning an online college degree. I am a doctoral student from Walden University.

You are invited to take part in a telephone interview as part of my research study about military students' persistence in earning an online college degree. You were chosen for the interview because you enrolled in the online college as a degree-seeking student, self-reported a military status, are in a good academic standing, and progressed to your senior year of academic study. Please ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the interview.

If you agree to participate in this study, our interview will take about 45 to 60 minutes. I will ask questions about your educational experiences at the college, ability and willingness to persist, and choices or decisions you feel you must make to stay on track with degree completion. You are asked to participate in this research study on a voluntary basis. This means you are not obligated to participate in this study. The potential risks of this research are minimal and your identity will remain confidential.

I would like to record our conversation for accuracy. Your identity will not be revealed in the transcription. The audio recording of this interview is for my use only and will be kept in a secure place during the period of analysis. If you feel uncomfortable about answering any questions during our conversation, please let me know because you have the right to only answer the questions you choose to answer. Or, if you prefer to answer questions without being recorded, please let me know and I will stop the recorder.

My faculty advisor is Dr. Delmus Williams email at XXX@waldenu.edu. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Ms. Aysel "Renay" Williams via email at XXX@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Director of the Research Center at Walden University. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of the verbal consent form and my advisor's contact information will be forwarded to you through electronic mail.

"Do you have any questions?"
"Do you agree to voluntarily participate in this interview process?"
Yes _____ continue phone call

No _____ end phone call

Appendix D: Interview Guide

In 2003, Rovai defined persistence as a student's ability and willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within a program of study until graduation.

1. How do you measure your ability or commitment to remain engaged in academic activities within your online degree program? Why?
2. What activities do you perform to stay on track with your degree completion?
3. What do you perceive as factors that contribute to your academic success?
4. How have you managed situations that impeded your progress toward degree completion?
5. How do you measure your willingness or readiness to remain engaged in academic activities within your online degree program? Why?
6. Can you tell me about a recent challenge you had to overcome in your degree program, from the time you became aware of your situation up to the point you made a decision to take action?
7. What decisions or choices do you feel you have had to make in order to persist in earning your online college degree?
8. What strategies do you feel are important in order to persist in an online degree program at the college?

Closing: Thank you very much for your time and openness. Your identity will not be revealed in the transcription. The audio recording of this interview is for my use only and will be kept in a secure place during the period of analysis.

Appendix E: Reflective Journal

Date & Time	March 17, 2015 at 12:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 1
Participant (Pseudonym)	Ashley
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	Finally! My first interview. I was excited and nervous during the phone call because this was my first opportunity to interview a participant for a major study. I felt like I established rapport with Ashley and successfully completed the interview. Her openness helped me to gain a deeper understanding of how she experienced persistence at the online college.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	The interview was audiotaped; therefore, I actively listened to Ashley and only recorded handwritten notes on the interview guide to capture terms (goals, set deadlines, time management, and stay consistent) or interesting phrases related to the research topic ("my goal outweighs my unwillingness to do my schoolwork"). In the context of the study, Ashley used goal to mean completing her bachelor's degree program. The terms, quote, and meaning unit might be useful to label codes in the thematic analysis. I asked this participant to choose a pseudonym. She chose her real middle name. To assure confidentiality, Ashley is her reassigned pseudonym.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? How?)	1. Modify the phone script. Add a sentence about the brief pause that occurs once I press the record button to connect the call to the audio recorder. 2. Improve the sound quality. I might try a different set of earbuds or buy a set with a built-in microphone.

Date & Time	March 23, 2015 at 3:30 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 2
Participant (Pseudonym)	Ingrid
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	There was laughter during this interview. The light mood seemed to put both of us at ease - a fitting military command, which also means relaxed.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Because relevant topics needed to be discussed in a limited amount of time, I used probing techniques to encourage richer responses. At times, I was inquisitive, quiet, or poised to use the "uh-huh" probe that best fit the situation. I think Ingrid spoke candidly about her persistence, especially when she measured her commitment to remain engaged in academic activities. She said that she is somewhat persistence because she lets her job interfere with her commitment to study. Although this behavior reminded me of military core values (duty first), I reserved my thoughts for memoing and proceeded with the interview questions. I decided to ask this participant to choose a pseudonym. She also chose her real middle name. Ingrid is her reassigned pseudonym.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. Print modified version of the phone script that informs the participant, "After starting the recorder, I will briefly cover your consent to participate in this study and permission to record our conversation." This is how I can be consistent and follow the same procedures for all interviews. 2. Reconsider whether it is a good idea to ask participants to choose a pseudonym. Test again.

Date & Time	March 30, 2015 at 12:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 3
Participant (Pseudonym)	Jayson
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	The phone rang a few times and I wondered whether Jayson had time to participant in the interview as scheduled. He answered!
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Although I tried to be mindful of time zone differences, Jayson's area code did not match his physical location. He was temporarily assigned to a unit overseas, however agreed to participate in this study. Unlike the first 2 participants, Jayson described his ability to remain in engaged in academic activities by "the number of completions and the number of hours" that he put into a course. He mentioned different concepts of time and said he works "full time as a military person," tries to "maximize my free time," and this is the reason he is working on his degree "one course at a time but …continuously throughout the whole year." Time is the common theme across the interview data. He chose the pseudonym, Jayson, and I chose the spelling.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	March 31, 2015 at 12:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 4
Participant (Pseudonym)	Keisha
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	Initially disappointment when we did not establish contact as scheduled. I was happy once I finally reached Keisha and began the interview.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Keisha and I had a telephone interview scheduled for 10:00 a.m. I call as scheduled and did not receive a prompt to leave a voice mail. We eventually connected and rescheduled the interview for 12:00 p.m. because she needed to take care of a military obligation. Once we connected, Keisha presented the concepts of: juggling, the Reserves, family, goals, normal hours, and overtime. Now that I have simultaneously collected and analyzed some data, I can see repetitious connectors. For example, time is a repeating word and most likely linked to a theme emerging in the data. During the interview, I jotted down a note about double-dipping based on Keisha's comments about new credits and the need to send an official transcript to the online college. Keisha might be concurrently enrolled in two colleges. Double-dipping is a new category. She told me to assign her pseudonym.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. Going forward, I will use a name age calculator to assign pseudonyms based on the participant's age and gender. 2. Purchase new earbuds w/microphone to control volume and block out background noise.

Date & Time	April 1, 2015 at 11:00 a.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 5
Participant (Pseudonym)	Bryan
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	I began the interview by stating, "Today is April the 1st, April Fool's Day" (laughter). I was happy Brian shared detailed chunks of information. Once the interview ended, I reflected on my own persistence and what it meant to push through. I felt a sense of urgency and need to reach my educational goals.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	This interview was unique in many ways. Bryan used bold words to describe his experiences with persistence. He talked about working 18-hour days and coming home to "do something" and not going to bed until he had done something in terms of schoolwork. He spoke of his determination and drive to do better. In order to manage situations that impeded his progress, he responded: "Just suck it up and do it." His success strategies are self-discipline and pushing through. I plan to label some data as "miscellaneous" because it does not seem to fit into a specific category.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 2, 2015 at 3:30 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 6
Participant (Pseudonym)	Luke
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	Luke's motivational story inspired me. I love sea stories! My new noise-canceling headphones w/microphone worked great! I could hear loudly and clearly.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	I recorded handwritten notes on the interview guide. My initial thoughts during the interview: *the use of the term stop: stop out; attitude: don't quit and suck it up; behaviors: push through and dig in.* During the second wave of samples, Luke had an enrolled status because his degree had not been conferred. I confirmed his eligibility to participate in this study. He excitedly described the positive influence of his mentors, family members, and work colleagues that led him to accomplish his educational goals. Luke encountered an academic error and chose to use the military decision-making process to work through his frustration. He took a short break, and then returned to complete his remaining degree requirements. His persistence consisted of two solid years of courses, commitment of time, and time management. Completing a degree at the online college enabled Luke to experience school "on the other side of the chalkboard." This is an interesting perspective to mention in the study.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 16, 2015 at 5:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 7
Participant (Pseudonym)	Fernando
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	I was surprised when Fernando said he is "not the model student." I wondered what he meant by this statement.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Fernando spoke a lot of military jargon and used terms that were familiar to me. I took care not to make assumptions about the meaning of his responses. I listened and waited for him to tell me more. He explained that he was not a model student because he has "persisted on and off based on time." Fernando said that a sense of accomplishment had contributed to his academic success. I jotted down "how so" and allowed him to continue his response. After he finished talking about his accomplishment, I asked how a sense of accomplishment had contributed to his success. Echoing probe: How was it challenging to get to work on a course? These probing techniques really helped to move the conversation along in meaningful ways.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. Maintain a list of useful prompts to encourage detailed responses.

Date & Time	April 16, 2015 at 8:20 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 8
Participant (Pseudonym)	Henry
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings	Intrigued. I wondered where our conversations would take us.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Henry had long answers, supplied rich details, and as he said led me "down a rabbit hole" at times. And in response, I thought going down the rabbit hole too far was probably not the best idea. This is why I found the semistructured format and re-direction useful to ensure all relevant topics had been addressed in the time allotted. Once I transcribe the interview data, I can take a closer look at the following potential codes: military advisors, forward movement, CLEP/DANTES, proficiency; phrases: pace and tempo, distractors of life, it is not hard, and independent learning.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 17, 2015 at 9:00 a.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 9
Participant (Pseudonym)	Charles
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	I enjoyed learning about Charles' degree program and professional background.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	Similar to other participants, Charles shared stories about his deployment, rhythm, drive, and desire to "get it done." We had a lengthy conversation about his ability and willingness to remain engaged in academic activities within his online degree program. Once again, concepts of time could be heard throughout the interview. Repetitious concepts: a lot of time, time management, deadlines, hours, scheduling, time commitment, period of time, given moment, and rhythm.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

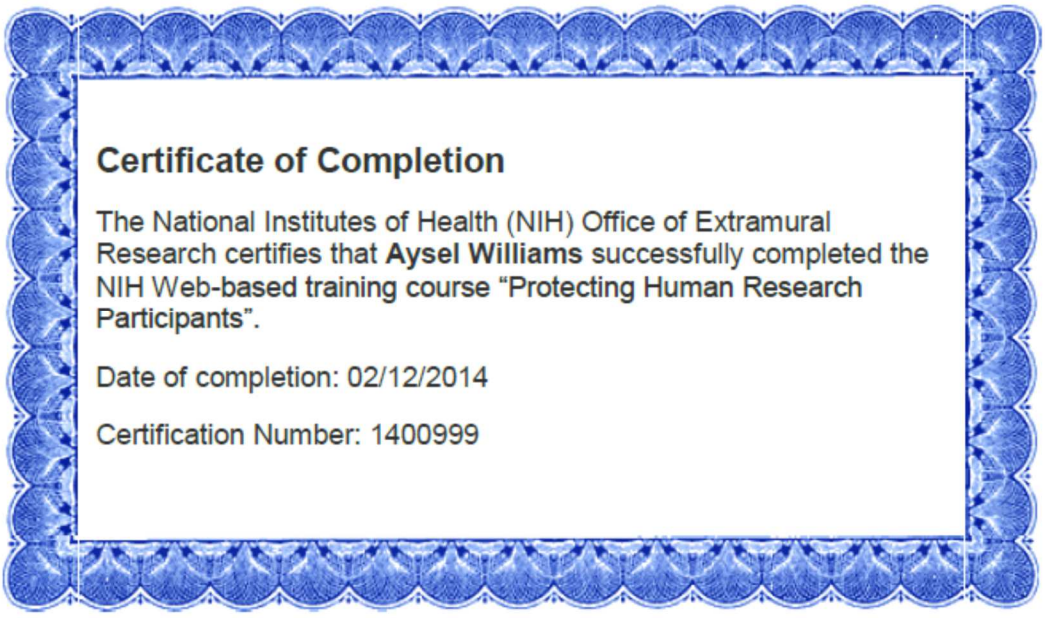
Date & Time	April 17, 2015 at 12:30 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 10
Participant (Pseudonym)	David
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings	I was very comfortable speaking to David. I shared his excitement about his recent accomplishment – graduation!
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	During the third wave of samples, David had an enrolled status because his degree had not been conferred. I confirmed his eligibility to participate in this study. His bachelor's degree was conferred today. I congratulated him. This interview was a great opportunity to learn how a "former military student" persisted at the online college. David separated from the military, remained unemployed, and attended college full-time. Memorable quote: "So money was a little bit tight …I was eating beans and rice and rice and beans and you know not spending a ton of money." I plan to mention this quote in my study. I think the quote says a lot about David's commitment to make school his main "purpose" and "reason for being."
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 17, 2015 at 1:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 11
Participant (Pseudonym)	Emanuel
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	I was unsure about the cause of the low phone volume. I had doubts about whether or not I could obtain a high quality audio file and capture the essence of our conversation.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	During the pre-recording, Emanuel and I attempted to adjust our phone volume. I manually adjusted the microphone on my end and proceeded to record the interview. I preferred to listen rather than take notes; however, it was necessary for me to take notes as a backup. Concepts of time: Overtime, limited time, one course at a time, set time, and break. I noted Emanuel's recent transition from an active duty status to a terminal leave status in preparation for his retirement. He said that he had contacted his Ed Center to request active duty tuition assistance, but was no longer entitled to receive financial support because he had "checked out" of his command and his service obligation ended. According to Emanuel, this was a stressful situation. Although I was well aware of military TA policies and the process to request veterans' education benefits, I maintained the role of the data collection instrument. It was important for me to listen to Emanuel's story and allow him to interpret his own experiences. This situation will be coded under a military topic.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 20, 2015 at 7:00 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 12
Participant (Pseudonym)	Matthew
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	Rescheduled from 4/19/15 to 4/20/15. I felt uncertain about the interview until we finally connected and completed it.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	During the third wave of samples, Matthew had an enrolled status because his degree had not been conferred. I confirmed his eligibility to participate in this study. Matthew used military jargon and discussed the way he persisted in spite of being deployed and training military personnel. Codes linked to the military: military installation, branch, basic training, military instructor, deploy, coming back, military personnel, down range, combat operations, Ed Center, and get out. Phrase: "the end state is -- in military jargon -- the mission complete." Memorable quote: "…it's a sacrifice on top of a sacrifice."
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Date & Time	April 24, 2015 at 12:30 p.m.
Purpose	Telephone Interview with Participant 13
Participant (Pseudonym)	Gregory
Description (A summary of the event, activity, or experience being considered for reflection)	One-on-one semistructured interview
Feelings (Emotional response)	What didn't I feel during this interview? I felt like it was a privilege to hear Gregory's courageous and heartwarming story. I look forward to listening to the audiotape, transcribing the interview data, and reading the transcription.
Evaluation (What was good or bad about the situation)	I called Gregory at noon and he requested a call back at 12:30. When we reconnected, Gregory was outdoors and I could hear kids in the background. During the interview, he spoke lovingly about his large family. Gregory was very respectful and called me "ma'am." Similar to other participants, Gregory described what it was like to simultaneously engage in online courses and be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. He provided high quality, descriptive data to include codes linked to the military: operation tempo, military training, being away, and combat stress. This is the stopping point as no new concepts emerged in the data.
Action Plan (What would I do differently in the future? (How?)	1. No action required.

Appendix F: NIH Certificate



Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Aysel Williams** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 02/12/2014

Certification Number: 1400999