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Challenges for Active-Duty Military Personnel in Completing Undergraduate Degrees

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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2021

Abstract

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Kathleen Marie Parrish

MAS, Central Michigan University, 2012

BS, University of Mount Olive, 2008

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The problem this basic qualitative study addressed was the low baccalaureate degree completion rate for airmen at an Air Force base in the Eastern Region of the United States (AFER). This problem is important because understanding the challenges airmen face may enable leadership to support degree completion, thus improve employment options after military service. The purpose of this study was to examine experiences of enlisted airmen completing a baccalaureate degree while serving in the military. Bean and Metzner's theory on nontraditional student attrition was used as a framework for this study. The research questions were designed to help understand the challenges enlisted airmen experience and strategies they consider important to complete a degree. The participants included 10 active duty airmen stationed at an AFER working towards a baccalaureate degree. Data were collected in interviews and analyzed for common themes. The analysis of interview data revealed support from leadership was a key factor for academic success. Data results were used to develop a position paper for leadership with recommendations for implementing a unit level education program. Through this paper, leadership will gain insight on how to better support the education goals of their airmen. Improving degree completion rates for military personnel increases employment options when they transition out of the military, which can spark social change through these opportunities. At the local level, this project will support and encourage multiple services and agencies working together to support the needs of military learners.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to the men and women who serve and who have served in the United States military. I thank you for your selfless service to our country and appreciate the sacrifices you make for the security of our nation. I especially give thanks to my brothers and sisters who served with me in the United States Air Force during my military career; together we endured challenges and hardships that made me the person I am today.

I also dedicate this work to my family, as they understand what "Service before self" truly means. First and foremost, to my husband Dean Parrish, who served with me in the military for over 20 years as my partner and advocate. Your sacrifices are truly appreciated, and you will forever be my personal hero. I am so thankful for our marriage and forever friendship we share. As active-duty military parents we raised two phenomenal daughters despite long separations due to deployments and mission requirements. Lauren and Grace are our greatest achievement, and I am honored to be their mother.

My father is the reason I chose to enlist in the United States Air Force. I always knew he served in Vietnam; however, he never spoke of his experiences in the military. His steadfast work ethic and humble nature gave me an example to emulate. He has always been so proud of me for being the first in my family to complete a college degree and always encouraged me to reach for a doctorate.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to several individuals who provided support, mentorship, and encouragement throughout this difficult journey. I have had so many people wish me well and encourage me throughout this process; there is no way I could have completed this study without help and support.

I would like to first acknowledge my doctoral chair and mentor, Dr. Steve Butler for keeping me on course and pushing me to do my very best throughout this journey. As a fellow Air Force veteran and scholar, your insight and understanding of the military experience provided clarity. Your encouragement and support will never be forgotten; I am so grateful to have had you as my chair.

I have had fantastic committee members who provided valuable feedback. Dr. Dustin Hebert, Dr. Debbie Beebe, and Dr. Charlotte Redden served as my second committee members. Although each provided a different perspective, they all worked tirelessly to guide me by providing, scholarly advice and honest feedback. Your sound advice and recommended changes to my research design are truly appreciated.

I would like to acknowledge my vocational rehabilitation counselor from the Department of Veteran Affairs. Bridget believed in me from the start and managed my disabled veteran benefits so I could afford to complete this degree.

I would like to thank my family and friends. I thank my husband for picking me up and encouraging me on the multiple times when I wanted to give up. Thank you for putting up with the stacks of articles, diagrams, and room full of coding and never complaining about the mess. My daughters, who have been students with me their entire lives, always believed in me and never let me doubt myself for very long.

I would also like to acknowledge my parents. My father has always pushed me to achieve as much as possible; his pride has always been my reason to work hard and strive for greatness. My mother who was taken from life way too young, never finished High School; however, she completed her GED at 50 years old with a terminal illness because it was so very important to her. Her humble determination has stayed with me as an example and hopefully always will.

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The Local Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the low baccalaureate degree completion rate for enlisted personnel at an Air Force base in the Eastern region of the United States (AFER). To obtain degree completion data specific to AFER, I requested the data via an official Freedom of Information Act request. According to the official response from the base used in this research, as of July 1, 2018, only 284 or 7.7% of the 3,679 total enlisted airmen assigned to the base had completed their baccalaureate degrees. This number includes degrees that were completed prior to enlisting in the military but there are no available data that break this demographic down further (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018).

The AFER has a lower rate of baccalaureate degree completion among its airmen when compared to national data. According to the *Digest of Education Statistics 2014*, 26.5% of Americans aged 25 to 29 years old have completed a bachelor's degree (Snyder et al., 2016). The United States Air Force overall has a much lower degree completion rate. According to the most recent data released to the public by the Air Force Personnel Center (2020), as of January 1, 2020, 8.9% of those currently serving as enlisted personnel on active duty in the Air Force worldwide have completed a baccalaureate degree. These data include all enlisted personnel from age 18 to 48 serving from 1 to 30 years in the United States Air Force; however, 78% of the enlisted personnel assigned are aged 22-29 (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020).

The AFER has an even lower degree completion rate of 7.7% for all enlisted personnel assigned (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018). Low degree completion rates suggest there are challenges for airmen to complete their degree. Gaining an understanding of the challenges encountered and strategies enlisted airmen use to meet these challenges may lead to initiatives designed to improve the degree completion rate.

Although there is evidence to show that members of the Air Force receive a baccalaureate at lower rates than the general population, this problem is compounded by the lack of research on this topic. Scholars and government agencies have noted that research specific to the study of enlisted active duty military members is limited. The majority of this research pertains to the educational experiences of veterans versus those serving on active duty. There is substantial information related to military affiliated students such as veterans or military family members using education benefits as there is a great deal of research that has been published by practitioners at institutions of higher learning in journals regarding this population (Jones, 2013; Olsen et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2013).

The research is further complicated as the majority of publications regarding military education fail to break down data by branch of service, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or military component, National Guard, Reserves, or active duty. The actual status of research participants is often unclear (Wilson et al., 2013). Enlisted airmen as a demographic are part of the active duty force but are also included in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserves. Veterans can come from any branch or

component of the Department of Defense and could be commissioned officers, warrant officers, or enlisted members. Often in the published research the terms military and veteran are used interchangeably with little explanation of branch, component, or veteran status (Jones, 2013). This lack of clarity was identified by the American Council on Education (2018) as many institutions do not have consistent and reliable methods for collecting military connected information, thus including these students in the general population regarding data reporting. Until more specific data can be collected, researchers are encouraged to utilize existing data sources (Molina & Morse, 2015).

Rationale

All enlisted personnel will eventually transition into veteran status. Historically the unemployment rate in the United States for veterans is slightly higher than for nonveterans. In 2018, the veteran unemployment rate was 3.9% with a civilian unemployment rate of 3.3% for nonveterans; however, these data also show that 50.3% of veterans are not counted as active in the workforce, compared to 34% of civilians who were not actively working or seeking work (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a). According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019b), the unemployment rate in 2019 for those with a bachelor's degree was 2.2% with median weekly earnings of $1,248, whereas the unemployment rate for individuals with some college but no degree was 3.3% with median weekly earnings of $833. Education is viewed as a path toward employment opportunities after separation from military service. Although the experiences of military students may prepare them for some civilian occupations, the transfer of skills is not always apparent to potential

employers and may not be enough to secure meaningful jobs outside of the military.

Civilian employers may struggle to understand the training and roles related to military

service (Carter et al., 2017). Higher education provides credentials that can translate

military skill sets to civilian employers. This is likely to continue, as an increasing

number of jobs now require a college degree (Hitt et al., 2015).

An average of 350 enlisted airmen assigned to AFER separate from the Air Force

each year (Personnel separations specialist assigned to research base, personal

communication, July 15, 2020). Many enlisted personnel at AFER increase the number of

classes they participate in during their final year of service as many rush to finish their

bachelor's degree while in the military. According to the education services officer at

AFER, several of these airmen fail to reach their goal of completing prior to retirement or

separation (Education services officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020).

Why more airmen do not have their baccalaureate degree is unclear, especially

given the incentives they have to enroll and complete their degree (Edwards, 2016). The

Air Force offers active duty airmen the opportunity to earn an associate degree through

the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) at no cost to the student (Department of

the Air Force, 2020). Associate degree completion rates are strong, as 25% of the enlisted

force at AFER has completed a degree at this level (Freedom of Information Act officer,

personal communication, September 23, 2018). The baccalaureate degree completion rate

at AFER is low (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication,

September 23, 2018); according to the AFER education services officer (Education

services officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020), a gap in practice may be the

cause. The strong emphasis placed on completion of a CCAF degree coupled with a lack of outreach at AFER regarding the importance of obtaining a baccalaureate degree may contribute to the current degree completion rates beyond the CCAF degree (Education services officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020).

A nonprofit organization has taken up the cause to monitor and examine the educational attainment of veterans. The Student Veterans of America has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense to collect and compile data related to the success and completion rates of enlisted military personnel and veterans (Levitan, 2017). A substantial amount of federal funding is allocated for active duty education benefits. The Air Force allocated over $180 million dollars for voluntary education in fiscal year 2016 (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 2015). Despite the substantial expenditures for education, published demographic data reflects no improvement in baccalaureate degree completion for active duty airmen (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). There is, however, an increase in overall active duty undergraduate course enrollments (Levitan, 2017). Leadership at all levels assigned at AFER is charged to encourage enlisted personnel to pursue personal and professional development. Although there are many programs available, programs are used by a small percentage of the enlisted airmen assigned (Education services officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020). Education outreach efforts conducted by the local education center have not been tracked and an education needs assessment has not been conducted in over 6 years (Group commander at AFER, personal communication, September 25, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. Low degree completion rates suggest there are challenges for airmen to complete their degree. Gaining an understanding of the challenges encountered and strategies enlisted airmen use to meet these challenges may lead to initiatives designed to improve the degree completion rate at AFER as well as other bases, which may be experiencing the same problem. Improving the degree completion rate would allow enlisted airmen better employment opportunities when they transition out of the military.

Definitions

AFER: In the context of this study, this is a United States Air Force installation located in the Eastern region of the United States. There are over 8,000 military members assigned to this base of which 3,679 are enlisted (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018).

Air Force Specialty Code: A code assigned for each job in the U.S. Air Force. Airmen are awarded a 3-skill level upon completion of technical training, a 5-skill level after at least 8 months of additional training, a 7-skill level after promotion to staff sergeant and completion of a 12-month training program, and a 9-skill level after promotion to senior master sergeant (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Airman: A gender-neutral term for all military personnel serving in the United States Air Force. The term airman is also a rank designated to enlisted personnel in the

pay grade of E-2. The airman tier includes all enlisted personnel serving in the grades of

E-1 through E-4 (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Community College of the Air Force: College that awards an Associate of

Applied Science Degree accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Commission on Colleges. Enlisted airmen may earn a degree in each Air Force Specialty

Code in which they earn a 5-skill level. The degree requires 24 semester hours of

technical credit, 15 semester hours of electives, six semester hours of leadership and

management, four semester hours of physical education, and 15 semester hours of general

education (Air University, 2015).

Military Tuition Assistance Program: A program that pays up to $4,500 per year

for active duty military members' education (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Montgomery GI Bill: In the context of this study, these are Department of

Veterans Affairs educational benefits awarded under Chapter 30 of Title 38, U.S. Code to

military members who enlisted after June 30, 1985, and served at least 3 years of

honorable service. This benefit may be used on active duty or after separation. This

educational benefit is automatically awarded unless benefits are transferred to the Post-

9/11 GI Bill (Morris, 2015).

Noncommissioned officer: In the context of this study, an enlisted airman serving

in the rank of E-5 through E-6. These personnel are direct supervisors of those in lower

enlisted ranks (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Post-9/11 GI Bill: In the context of this study, the Department of Veterans Affairs

educational benefits awarded under Chapter 33 to military members who have served on

active duty for 90 days or more after September 10, 2001. Air Force members must make a voluntary decision to transfer from the Montgomery GI Bill to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This transfer cannot be reversed (Morris, 2015).

Senior noncommissioned officer: In the context of this study, an enlisted airman serving in the rank of E-7 through E-9. This person is in a management position charged with leading lower enlisted military members (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Significance of the Study

This study focused specifically on airmen stationed at AFER who have completed some college coursework but have not completed a baccalaureate degree. This project was unique because it addressed the active duty military learner, an under researched area of higher education in comparison to other student populations (Olsen et al., 2014). Robust Tuition Assistance (TA) programs and expansion of the Montgomery GI Bill education benefit have contributed to significant course enrollments at no cost for the military student; however, degree completion at the baccalaureate level remains at 8.9% for those serving in the United States Air Force worldwide (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020) compared to the degree completion rate nationally of 26.5% (Snyder et al., 2016). The AFER reflects the problem within the Air Force as the degree completion rate is only 7.7% (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018).

This study will be significant to the local setting because the results and subsequent project (Appendix A) may increase degree completion for enlisted military personnel assigned at the AFER. This study will help the base's leadership at all levels

understand the needs of military members working to complete baccalaureate degrees. The results will provide information to aid military leaders at AFER to support degree completion. Enlisted personnel who complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty have professional opportunities for enlisted advancement and commissioning in the military (Starr-Glass, 2013). They also compete more effectively in the labor market after separation from the military (Carter et al., 2017). According to Routon (2014), although military personnel often acquire college credits and learning experiences while on active duty, these do not necessarily lead to employment after military discharge without completion of a degree.

This study will also be significant to other Air Force bases that have low degree completion rates. Because of common education programs and student characteristics, the results may be used to inform programs at other bases. Additionally, this study will contribute to the literature on higher education pursuits by those serving on active duty in the military. Scholars have noted that research specific to the study of enlisted active duty military members is limited. The majority of the available research pertains to the educational experiences of veterans versus those serving on active duty (Jones, 2013; Olsen et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2013).

The military offers a bridge to education for enlisted members by offering college tuition and GI Bill benefits for those on active duty (Department of the Air Force, 2020). Education and training are strong recruitment tools (Edwards, 2016; Radford, 2011); however, education benefits are used by less than half of enlisted personnel (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). Education has long been a force for social change by addressing

inequities in society (Kasworm et al., 2010). This is evident in the difference in unemployment rates for veterans who have a baccalaureate degree versus those who do not; the unemployment rate is reduced by 40.5% after degree completion at the baccalaureate level (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). The enlisted military population is offered the opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree at no cost while on active duty (Department of the Air Force, 2020); however, low degree completion rates show military members are not completing degrees at the baccalaureate level (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020).

Research Questions

The problem explored in this study was the low baccalaureate degree completion rate at AFER. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen related to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?

RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider to be important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree?

RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

This basic qualitative study used Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model as a framework as it directly relates to the challenges active duty military learners encounter while pursuing a baccalaureate degree. The central idea behind this theory is how nontraditional students are affected primarily by environmental factors such as family obligations and responsibilities that are not related to the academic institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This model gives more weight to the many external factors nontraditional students face than to institutional factors.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the conceptual model (Figure 1) is based on four sets of variables: background and defining, academic, social integration, and environmental. These variables work together to impact academic and/or psychological outcomes, thus impacting the intent to leave and or drop out of an academic program. Understanding the sets of variables and how they relate to one another is paramount in understanding the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model.

Figure 1

Bean and Metzner's Nontraditional Student Attrition Model.
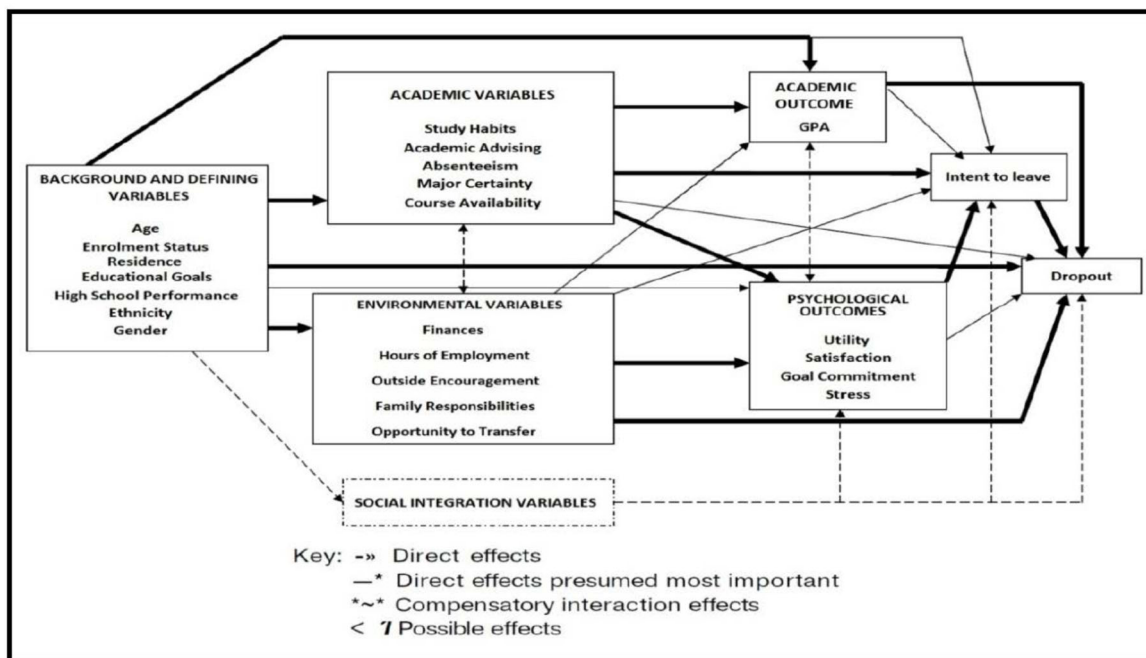
Note. Adapted from "A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition," by J. Bean and B. Metzner, 1985, *Review of Education Research, 55*, p. 491. Copyright 1985 by the American Educational Research Association; reproduced with permission from the publisher (Appendix B).

The first set of variables, background and defining variables, includes age, enrollment status, and residence as three defining variables and high school performance, ethnicity, gender, and educational goals as four background variables. Although it is important to note that these may be mediated by other variables in the model, Bean and Metzner (1985) included the background and defining variables because these are addressed in other reputable conceptual models of student attrition (Tinto, 1993) and because often it is the evaluation of a person's past experiences that uncovers factors that

influence attitudes and behaviors (Aljohani, 2016). According to French (2017), when considering diverse student groups and the use of conceptual frameworks in the research of persistence, the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model is relevant. These variables are applicable to the study of active duty learners as the Air Force is a diverse population (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020).

Additionally, in regard to enrollment status, the Air Force has established a path to associate degree completion through the CCAF. All enlisted airmen are automatically enrolled in the CCAF and start earning credits toward degree completion with their friends and coworkers in technical training. In regard to the variable of educational goals, compared to their civilian counterparts, military service improves the chances for degree completion for enlisted personnel at the associate degree level but reduces the likelihood of completing a 4-year education (Wang et al., 2012). The Air Force is the only branch of the military that offers an accredited associate degree. Enlisted airmen may earn up to 47 semester hours through the CCAF by completing military training associated with their jobs. For airmen to complete an Associate in Applied Science degree through the CCAF, completion of 21 semester hours in general education coursework or testing equivalent is required along with the 47 semester hours earned through military training. According to the research base's Freedom of Information Act officer (personal communication, September 23, 2018), of the 3,679 enlisted airmen assigned to the research base in 2017, 1,319 had earned their Associate in Applied Science degree through the CCAF. The number of CCAF degree completions has grown as completion of a CCAF degree was

made a mandatory requirement for promotion to higher enlisted ranks in 2014 (Air University, 2015).

The second set of variables in the conceptual model, academic performance, includes study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major uncertainty, and course availability. Bean and Metzner (1985) included academic variables in agreement with Tinto's (1993) theory of persistence as they are expected to have indirect effects on student attrition through academic performance and through the psychological outcome variables through intent to leave. For example, student grade point average in college is expected to be based on not only past performance but also these academic variables such as study habits. Students who perform poorly academically are expected to drop out of college at a higher rate than students who perform well academically (Aljohani, 2016; Bean & Metzner, 1985). The majority of airmen attending college do so via distance learning (Mentzer et al., 2014); many of the academic factors addressed in the model such as academic advising, course availability, and absenteeism are not highly applicable due to the nature of online learning. Additionally, academic support to develop study habits and understand the degree requirements may be lacking for those on active duty as the majority of resources available are not geared toward part-time, nontraditional students (Mentzer et al., 2014). This leaves much of the weight of academic variables on the individual drive of the military student and the support of their leadership (Arminio et al., 2015).

The third set of variables, social integration, refers to the extent and quality of interaction the student has with the institutional social and support systems available at

their school (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Social integration is associated with personal

matters with coworkers and friends; it is not related to the process of studying (Zhu et al.,

2013). For traditional students, social integration has been positively related to student

persistence (Tinto, 1993); however, Bean and Metzner (1985) found that commuter, part-

time, and older students were markedly less involved in campus activities with little

impact on attrition. For this study, Bean and Metzner's model is applicable because of the

difficulty for military members to achieve social integration at their school due to the

unique culture of the military and the transitory nature of military service (Wilson et al.,

2013). Military culture has a specific set of values such as honor, allegiance to command

structure, masculinity, commitment to comrades, and mission accomplishment making

the role of student difficult for many military personnel to realize (Arminio et al., 2015).

In regard to active duty Air Force students, CCAF students begin earning credits in

technical school (Air University, 2015) and experience academic integration when

studying together and exchanging academic ideas and principles (Tomas-Miquel et al.,

2015).

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the most substantial effects on student

attrition are expected from the environmental variables. These are factors that the

academic institution has little control over but may pull the student away. Environmental

variables include family responsibilities, opportunities to transfer, hours of employment,

outside encouragement, and finances. According to Bean and Metzner, environmental

variables are more important than academic variables to the persistence of nontraditional

students. For example, when there are positive academic and environmental variables,

students should remain in school; when both are poor, students are expected to leave school. When there are positive academic variables and poor environmental variables, students are expected to leave school; however, when the environmental variables are positive, and the academic variables are poor, students are expected to stay in school (Aljohani, 2016). Environmental variables are applicable to this study as military students often balance family obligations and military requirements such as established work hours, deployments, training, physical fitness, supervision duties, and being on call 24 hours a day (Cornell-d'Echert, 2012).

Review of the Broader Problem

I found research material pertaining to military education benefits and the military learner. The review of the broader problem begins with the historical context of military and veteran education benefits from World War II to present day Air Force education benefits. I then explored military deployments and trauma in relation to degree completion. The review concludes with an exploration of the unique military culture and how it impacts degree completion. I reviewed scholarly journals and articles on educating military personnel to include military personnel with disabilities and those transitioning from the combat environment. Additionally, I examined articles related directly to military student success and degree completion. I found very few sources directly related to degree completion for active duty military members. Ford and Vignare (2015) conducted exploratory research on the topic of military learners and found a limited body of knowledge on the topic. This lack of information was confirmed by Hitt et al. (2015), who stated "limited data are available to characterize the state of higher education with

respect to support America's student service members" (p. 537). There are very few studies in the literature on the active duty student (Hammond, 2016; Jones, 2013; Olsen et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2013).

Key words used to conduct searches for information on educating military personnel included *military learner, Air Force education, airmen and education, military degree completion,* and *military college students.* The databases included EBSCO, ProQuest, Academic Search Premier, United States Air Force and Department of Defense publications, and the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Historical Perspective on Military Education

The education benefit known as the GI Bill was created to assist American veterans returning from service after World War II. The United States government established this benefit as a lesson learned from World War I. When World War I veterans returned to a struggling work force the economy suffered. In 1932, after World War I, the military was ordered to remove 20,000 unemployed, homeless veterans and burn their camp near the White House (Humes, 2006). The high unemployment and civil unrest experienced after World War I could not be repeated after World War II. Over 16 million Americans were called to serve in the military between the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor and the surrender of Germany and Japan in 1945. There were over one million American casualties, including over 400,000 deaths (Pedigo, 1994). The education benefit was created to prevent millions of returning servicemen and women from flooding the workforce at a time when the government would return to peacetime spending levels. The creation and eventual approval of education benefits was due to the

great level of concern of the country suffering social unrest, economic depression, and mass unemployment (Hammond, 2017).

There was a great deal of opposition to creating veteran education benefits due to the social and political climate during this time. Colleges were primarily elitist organizations reserved for wealthy, Caucasian Americans (Buckley, 2004). Many colleges and universities were not open to the idea of admitting working class veterans into their institutions. Harvard University President James B. Conant was openly opposed to the bill due to the demographic of students who would be admitted to gain an advanced education (Buckley, 2004). The bill offered equal benefits for all veterans regardless of race and proposed equal unemployment compensation for all veterans. This equality was not accepted in southern states and the bill was almost lost because of this issue (Bannier, 2006).

Public Law 346, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill, was approved by the House of Representatives (Hammond, 2017). President Roosevelt signed the bill on June 22, 1944, allowing up to $500 per year toward tuition for up to 4 years and a living allowance of up to $75 per month. This was adequate to cover the full cost of tuition, books, fees, and supplies at the most prestigious institutions in the United States (Bannier, 2006). Veteran enrollment in colleges and universities surged to 49% within 3 years of the approval of the GI Bill (De La Garza et al., 2016). The GI Bill is now viewed as one of the most important events for higher education as it expanded admissions, influenced infrastructure, and diversified student population (Hammond, 2017). There were very limited education opportunities for enlisted members

while serving on active duty; therefore, even after the approval of the GI Bill, degree completion was only possible for the vast majority of enlisted members after separating from the military (Bannier, 2006).

According to Ackerman et al. (2009), the Vietnam era brought many challenges for those who served in the military. A lack of public support for the war made it difficult for veterans to attend college. College campuses were a popular location for antiwar protests and many veterans who attended college found it easier to not let people know they had served in the military. A large number of Vietnam veterans returned with psychological trauma and mental illness problems. Many of these veterans did not receive the assistance they needed and had difficulty transitioning into roles outside the combat environment (Ackerman et al., 2009). The GI Bill was modified in 1970 with the enactment of the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP). This program required service members to contribute up to $2,700 and the government would match contributions at a rate of two to one (Department of Veterans Affairs, 1990). Veteran attendance at higher learning institutions decreased dramatically during this period due to the combination of reduced education benefits and psychological issues. During this time there were very few education opportunities for enlisted personnel serving on active duty. The degree completion opportunities for enlisted members were limited to trial programs focused on commissioning a limited number of personnel (Wang et al., 2012). Because active duty members could be deployed at any time during the academic year it was difficult for those serving on active duty to complete college programs (Ackerman et al., 2009).

According to Bannier (2006), Representative Montgomery from Mississippi resurrected the GI Bill education benefit for veterans in 1984. This change required military members interested in education benefits to invest $1,200 in their first year of enlistment. In return, they received up to $400 per month for up to 36 months for education expenses. This was known as the Montgomery GI Bill (Bannier, 2006). Although this bill expanded education benefits for veterans, there were very few opportunities for active duty members to complete a bachelor's degree before they left active duty until the bill was expanded in 1985 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

The Gulf War era included several conflicts that started with Operation Desert Storm and continue with America's current involvement in the Middle East (Strong et al., 2014). Between 2001 and 2009 over one million veterans separated from the military; of these veterans, an estimated 17%-19% experienced mental health issues from their time on active duty (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). Because of the large influx of veterans, there were many changes throughout this period that had a significant impact on the military learner and degree completion for enlisted personnel (Radford, 2011). According to Edwards (2016), education benefits improved with considerable increases to GI Bill entitlements and the creation of military TA that would cover up to $4,500 annually toward tuition costs for those serving on active duty. This was the first service-wide program to encourage degree completion while serving on active duty (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). These benefits became a strong recruitment tool for an all-volunteer military (Edwards, 2016). Although people joined the military for the education benefits (Edwards, 2016), many servicemen and women did not use their benefits (Wang

et al., 2012). Radford (2011) found that during this time it was common for military students to take more than 7 years to complete an undergraduate degree while those not serving in the military were able to complete their degrees much faster.

Military personnel have served more than two million deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (White House, 2011), and approximately 40% of military members have served on multiple deployments (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2015). Wartime military service creates great potential for disruptions in the life of military members that create a delay to higher education (Hitt et al., 2015). In 2010, only 4.9% of the total 449,583 enlisted military personnel had completed a bachelor's degree (Department of Defense, 2011).

Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post 9/11 GI Bill offers the highest level of benefits ever provided to veterans (Jones, 2017). When President Obama signed the Post–9/11 GI Bill into law in 2009, the purpose was to allow Americans benefiting from the legislation and subsequent degree completion to be a part of an economic recovery and to strengthen the middle class (The White House, 2009). According to Redden (2009), the Post-9/11 GI Bill significantly expanded educational benefits and allowed military members to transfer education benefits to dependents (Redden, 2009). Post 9/11 benefits are authorized for personnel who served on active duty for at least 90 days after September 10, 2001 and may be used while on active duty, after separation, or a combination of both. There is no required contribution amount and the bill covers the entire cost of attending school up to the

maximum in-state tuition rate at public colleges and universities for 36 months (Liang

Zhang, 2020).

The entire cost of tuition, fees, and books in addition to a housing allowance is

included in the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Benefits may be used for any academic level,

vocational training, internships, and skilled trade training. The veteran has 15 years to use

the benefits and some personnel may transfer benefits to their spouse or children if they

agree to serve additional time in the military. The post 9/11 GI Bill is the most financially

comprehensive military education benefit to date (Jones, 2017). The law enacting the

Post 9/11 GI Bill dedicated significant resources to the education of millions of active

duty service members and veterans (Liang Zhang, 2020). Within a year of the Post 9/11

Bill being signed, more than 500,000 active duty members and veterans applied for

benefits (Hammond, 2017). Of the 246,322 Air Force enlisted active duty personnel, only

8.9% have a bachelor's degree (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). According to Hitt et

al. (2015), the majority of Post 9/11 benefits are utilized by military members after they

transition out of the military. Additionally, many military members elect to transfer their

education benefits to their children thus forfeiting their personal use of the education

benefits. Research of Blue Star families found 66% of those serving on active duty have

transferred benefits (Gonzalez et al., 2015). More than 928,000 military spouses and

dependents from all military branches used Post 9/11 GI Bill funds to attend schools in

the first five years (Shane, 2015).

Military Tuition Assistance Program

Each branch of the military offers TA for those serving on active duty (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). According to Jones (2017), it is most advantageous for military members to use TA benefits while on active duty and save the Post 9/11 GI Bill to transfer to a family member or use for a postgraduate or technical degree after leaving the military (Jones, 2017). The United States Air Force offers those serving on active duty $4,500 per year for tuition. This is capped at $250 per semester hour; any cost over this amount must be funded by another source. Airmen may use TA after they arrive at their first base; however, many enlisted personnel are unaware of how to use their education benefits (Gibbs et al., 2019). TA may be used for any regionally or nationally accredited institution that has signed a Department of Defense Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the TA program (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). There are limiting factors for eligibility such as performance reports, passing physical fitness testing, disciplinary actions, and supervisor approval (Department of the Air Force, 2020). Because the process to utilize TA benefits is cumbersome, education specialists are assigned to every military base (Gibbs et al., 2019; Vance et al., 2014).

The Air Force TA program is managed at every Air Force base by an education office (Gibbs et al., 2019). The base commander is responsible for education services available at each base; however, management of the program is delegated to the education office. According to Evans et al. (2015), having a dedicated education center allows military students access to support and courses that better meet the unique schedule demands of the military. The education offices are managed by an education

services officer and staffed with educational counselors who help military learners find education programs that meet their needs (Gibbs et al., 2019; Vance et al., 2014). Education offices also manage military financial benefits and contract colleges for the specific needs of the base population (Gibbs et al., 2019). The education office provides guidance on the TA program, education counseling, college credit equivalency testing, and the CCAF (Evans et al., 2015). Although all Air Force bases have the same requirements, the quality of program management, extent of customer outreach, and degree completion rates vary at each education center throughout the Air Force (Education Services Officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020). Degree completion is not evaluated across the Air Force as there is no requirement for education centers to achieve specific numbers in managing education services (Department of the Air Force, 2020).

Community College of the Air Force

The CCAF was established in 1972 to award technical degrees at the associate level. CCAF is part of Air University headquartered at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, and is regionally accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. There are 67 different programs that are directly related to all enlisted Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC). For example, an enlisted member who is a firefighter earns credits toward an Associate of Applied Science in Fire Science. All Air Force technical and leadership courses are affiliated with CCAF and are evaluated for award of credit. The degree requires 24 semester hours in the technical area, six semester hours in leadership and management, four semester hours of physical

education, 15 semester hours of general education, and 15 semester hours of electives. The entire degree may be earned through military courses with the exception of the general education requirements (Air University, 2015). The transfer of training skills into CCAF technical credits is a significant benefit the Air Force offers (Olt, 2018; Sikes et al., 2018).

The Air University Associates to Baccalaureate Cooperative (AU-ABC) program is a partnership with 62 colleges and universities to allow transfer of the CCAF degree. There are 209 bachelor's degree programs offered through schools that accept the entire CCAF degree as transfer credit. These schools offer completion of the program with no more than an additional 60 semester hours of coursework. All AU-ABC programs may be completed through distance learning and accept military TA (Air University, 2015). The transfer from CCAF to partner colleges is an Air Force specific benefit. Without this agreement colleges would not necessarily award credit for military training (Olt, 2018). Enlisted airmen have an opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree through the AU-ABC program at no cost; however, degree completion rates across the Air Force have only increased 1% over the 6 years this program has been available (Department of Defense, 2011).

Military Deployments, Trauma, and Degree Completion

The United States is experiencing the longest and largest sustained involvement in armed conflict in modern history (Hitt et al., 2015). More than 2.4 million veterans have returned from deployments to the Middle East since September 11, 2001, many of these veterans sustained physical and psychological trauma (Spelman et al., 2012). Many

military personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan encountered dangerous combat situations; many of these veterans encounter significant difficulty returning to their lives after deployment. Of the one million plus veterans who served between 2001 and 2009, an estimated 17%-19% experienced mental health issues from their time on active duty (Campbell & Riggs, 2015). These veterans can face physical, mental, and psychosocial issues that affect their ability to reintegrate into community and family structures (Strong et al., 2014). As many as 40% of the enlisted personnel currently serving in the Air Force have deployed multiple times (Moore et al., 2020).

Creamer and Forbes (2004) found that 10%-13% of Gulf War veterans presented posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms within 2 years of returning and this percentage grew as time passed. Crabtree-Nelson and DeYoung (2017) found a considerable number of military members deal with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries while continuing to serve on active duty. According to Fulton et al. (2015), it is estimated that 23% of personnel serving in the military have some level of PTSD; however, Dillon et al. (2017) found only half of those serving with PTSD will engage in treatment due to the stigma associated with seeking mental health care. PTSD is a highly stigmatized disability that can often have a negative effect on veteran students (Kirchner, 2015). PTSD victims often suffer other psychiatric illnesses such as anxiety disorder, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. According to Kirchner (2015), these illnesses affect abilities vital to education, such as persistence, memory, and attention. The invisible, emotional, and psychological issues that military students bring to campus challenge their educational experiences and impact academic program completion (Kraus

& Rattray, 2012). Kirchner (2015) found the public believes that most military veterans have some form of mental health issue, this in turn adds to the stereotyping of veterans who are higher education students (Kirchner, 2015).

In addition to the psychological issues related to deployments, there are also social issues that have an impact on the ability to start or complete an education goal (Darcy et al., 2018). The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (2008) concluded that deployed military members reported significant drops in marital satisfaction, dramatic increases in divorce rates and infidelity, and an increase in other marital problems. According to Gewirtz et al. (2018), over the past 15 years almost two million service members have participated in combat deployments, approximately 40% of these service members are parents. Additionally, Strong et al. (2014) found significant child behavior problems requiring clinical or psychiatric treatment were noted in families when a parent deployed for extended periods. Social factors are distracting, emotionally charged, and time-consuming (Strong et al., 2014). These are all reasons that may prevent a military member from pursuing education goals.

With the availability of online learning, many military personnel take college courses while deployed (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). The Air Force, in particular, has sponsored many education programs and provided Internet access for deployed airmen (Mackenzie et al., 2018). Reliable Internet access is only available at locations with a developed military infrastructure; these locations are typically located in areas that are not in hostile combat zones (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2020). Despite having access to the

Internet, some deployed personnel are unable to take courses because of time constraints imposed by their military duties (Thomason, 2013).

According to Hayden (2017), many academic institutions with large student veteran populations have tailored services to meet the needs of these nontraditional learners. Kurzynski (2014), found there are many service programs linked with the Department of Veterans Affairs. These programs are primarily focused on providing assistance to veterans with disabilities as they transition into the educational environment. Very few of these programs are useful to the student serving on active duty as they are focused on veterans attending school in residence, not as an online learner (Kurzynski, 2014).

Military Culture and Degree Completion

It is important to consider the military culture when educating the active duty learner. The military culture is a unique environment because the life experiences of those serving in the military are so different from the civilian populace; therefore, an understanding of military culture is required in order to understand the military learner (Hayden et al., 2017). Military cultures are strong with a set of values that sometimes make it difficult to navigate between academic studies and military duties (Starr-Glass, 2015). Military culture has a specific set of values such as honor, allegiance to command structure, and masculinity, commitment to comrades, and mission accomplishment (Arminio et al., 2015). The military requires strict and immediate compliance with verbal and written orders; a completely different mindset from the critical thinking and questioning environment in higher education settings (Jones, 2017). Some research

suggests military veterans struggle socially and academically more than other students in higher education (Darcy et al., 2018; Kapell et al., 2017; Merchur-Karp & Klempin, 2016). The imbedded military ethos is critical to the military organization to the point that military culture rejects the norms of individual achievement and instead embraces the collective need for mission accomplishment (Arminio et al., 2015). According to Barnao (2019), military culture reinforces norms and values through rigid training to transition from a civilian to a military member. Military training has a lasting effect on how military members learn throughout their adult lives. Like other students, veterans face challenges such as being the first in their family to attend college and navigating the unique requirements of college responsibilities (Kapell et al., 2017; Williams-Klotz et al., 2017) or balancing work, school, and family responsibilities (Hitt et al., 2015). Military students are a minority subset of the nontraditional student.

Unlike traditional students, nontraditional students usually have responsibilities that compete with their educational goals, such as supporting families and working full time (Arminio et al., 2015). Alfonso (2006) described nontraditional students as part-time enrollees who many times will have breaks in enrollment. Military students meet this description of nontraditional students but also usually attend multiple educational institutions and can be labeled in many cases as a swirling student (Baldwin, 2017). In their qualitative research, Forbus et al. (2011) suggested nontraditional students have stronger methods for coping with stress than traditional students. They concluded these skills supported their academic goals and were a direct result of their maturity and motivation. This conclusion should apply to enlisted active duty students, as they may

possess greater coping skills than their traditional counterparts based on their life and military experiences (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Gewirtz et al., 2018). Conversely, Bauman (2013) researched military students who were attending school after a military deployment and found these students' perceptions of campus employees could be classified as "allies, enemies, or unconcerned" (p. 41). The conclusions suggest veteran students tend to self-alienate from faculty members based upon their experiences and perception of inclusion (Bauman, 2013). Military students should be motivated to complete a degree as education benefits are the strongest military recruitment tool (Blaauw-Hara, 2017) and enlisted personnel who complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty have professional opportunities for advancement in the military (Starr-Glass, 2013).

Veterans have unique challenges such as differential treatment due to military stereotypes and stigma related to being in the military (Merchur-Karp & Klempin, 2016). In an online environment, military learners will often exhibit "psychological issues of secrecy, stoicism, and denial [that] add a layer of difficulty and possibly confusion [for the nonmilitary educator] who may see the world from a place of openness, fairness, and egalitarianism" (Hall, 2011, p. 16). The inability for students on active duty to participate as full-time students can create a sense of not belonging or being very different from their civilian classmates (Young et al., 2017). Some of the reasons military students cited for leaving academic programs include conflict between the roles of inexperienced student and trained military professional, painful social exchanges with other students and faculty

members about military service, and lack of structure in the academic organization (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018).

The structure of the academic institution is important as this determines services offered to students (Haines, 2013). Daly and Fox-Garrity (2013) found categories of students represented at most institutions include: first-term freshmen, minority students, and students from underrepresented ethnic groups. The researchers looked specifically at institutions registered as a Servicemembers Opportunity College, an organization of over 1,900 schools that self-identify as being military friendly. There were great differences in student support provided at these institutions. Several of these institutions considered having an employee dedicated to processing GI Bill education payments as the rationale to being described as a military friendly school; however, these are the schools that are recommended to those serving on active duty (Wilson et al., 2016). Heineman (2016) suggested military friendly colleges design orientation programs and faculty member training specifically for military connected students. Having an understanding of expectations and requirements helps military students adjust to an academic environment (Jones, 2017).

Unlike traditional students and veterans, the active duty student faces unique demands such as absences due to training, deployments, and frequent relocations. The nature of military service restricts the availability for service members to fully participate in academic programs (Fredman et al., 2019). Merchur-Karp and Klempin (2016) found that at the community college level, it was critical to increase awareness to those outside the military community about military students. This included educating faculty

members, other students, and residents in the local community to create a welcoming college culture for veterans. Military duties make achieving academic goals challenging and many times academic institutions are not equipped to meet the unique needs of military connected students (Hitt et al., 2015).

The issue of campus fit is discussed in the ethnographic study on student persistence conducted by Hitt et al. (2015), "past and current experiences, personal issues, institutional fit, and academic integration are important influences in student attrition" (p. 542). Additionally, institutional communication was cited as a key factor for student satisfaction (Hitt et al., 2015). Because of the transitory nature of active duty service, these issues are significant. According to Routon (2014), because military personnel traditionally move to a new location every two to three years and deploy to remote locations, attendance at traditional *brick and mortar* schools is difficult (Routon, 2014). Many active duty members attend several different colleges on their journey to completing a degree and most decide on programs that are entirely online (Mentzer et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2016); however, military affiliated students prefer a traditional in class format due to the ability to have a connection to faculty members and peers (Hembrough et al., 2018). Campus support staff should be mindful of the need for military students to have a sense of belonging and a specific person assigned to assist with navigating the college policies and military benefits (Young et al., 2017).

Demographic factors that predict academic success have been widely researched. D'Amico et al. (2014) concluded that prior academic experience was the most significant predictor of retention. Campbell and Riggs' (2015) research looked specifically at the

behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of college freshmen to determine continued enrollment. This research found the perceptions of the student regarding college was a stronger predictor than grade point average and the need for financial aid. McKinney and Burridge (2015) conducted research regarding student loans and persistence and concluded there was a positive effect on student persistence in the first year but found a negative effect on student persistence in the third and sixth year of school. Franke (2019) examined degree completion and financial aid and found a negative association with student loans and degree completion within 6 years. The programs available to active duty airmen allow for degree completion with no cost to the student. It is possible that active duty airmen could be more likely to find academic success, as they are unlikely to ever need to take on student loans (Franke, 2019; McKinney et al., 2015).

Implications

Understanding and addressing the challenges enlisted airmen face in completing a baccalaureate degree could have a positive impact on the airmen, Air Force leadership, and educational institutions serving military students. The results of this study will assist the base's leadership at all levels in understanding the needs of military members working to complete baccalaureate degrees. Degree completion has a positive impact on employment for separating military members (Lacity et al. 2016; U. S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). Carter et al. (2017) found degree completion as a key factor for veteran employment opportunities when transitioning from military life. Because most enlisted personnel join the military directly after high school, this is their only work experience (Buzzetta et al., 2017). Having a degree makes veterans more

competitive in most fields because civilian employers have difficulty translating military experience (Carter et al., 2017; Lacity et al., 2016). Air Force leadership would send a strong message to enlisted members by supporting degree completion beyond the CCAF degree. The CCAF degree is the only academic level tracked and measured by Air Force education centers (Department of the Air Force, 2020). Encouraging education endeavors beyond the CCAF would increase career options for enlisted members and open commissioning avenues for those who wish to serve as commissioned officers; a baccalaureate degree is a requirement for a commission. Bean and Metzners' (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model placed a strong emphasis on environmental factors such as outside encouragement and the opportunity to transfer. The AU-ABC program is available for Air Force personnel to transfer the entire CCAF degree toward a baccalaureate degree. By supporting enlisted airman to transfer CCAF degrees toward their baccalaureate degree and providing a mechanism to provide rewards for degree completion, persistence should be improved by the enlisted member (French, 2017).

The military student population represents a significant source for college student recruitment, comprised of approximately 2 million active duty personnel, 25 million veterans, and 411,000 reservists (Morris, 2015). Ford et al., (2009) reported great success at one particular location where military base leadership partnered with local colleges to address low degree completion rates. At this location, programs were specifically tailored to assist active duty military personnel at the University of West Florida with programs to improve persistence and degree completion. This program offered academic guidance to

military students. The gap in practice was discovered at this location and the needs of this student population were identified and local initiatives were found beneficial to the school and military student success. The AFER currently does not offer any partnerships or programs beyond the ones offered through the United States Air Force (Education services officer, personal communication, August 4, 2020). Despite the programs in place at the AFER, persistence is a problem, as the percentage of enlisted personnel with completed degrees at this location remains at 7.7% (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018). This is below the 8.9%-degree completion rate for Air Force enlisted personnel worldwide (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020) and below the national data citing 26.5% of Americans aged 25-29 years old have completed a baccalaureate degree (Snyder et al., 2016). This study will provide valuable insight into the specific challenges military students at the AFER experience while pursuing undergraduate degrees. This study will provide leadership at AFER with a project containing data specific to the needs and challenges of their enlisted airmen in regard to degree completion to address this gap in practice (Appendix A).

Summary

Section 1 addressed active duty military members stationed at AFER and the problems associated with completing a baccalaureate degree prior to separating from the Air Force. Despite robust education benefits, only 7.7% of enlisted personnel assigned to AFER have completed a baccalaureate degree (Freedom of Information Act officer, personal communication, September 23, 2018). This is below the overall Air Force baccalaureate completion rate of 8.9% (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). The next

section includes a description of the methods used in this study that address why some

military students persist in completing a baccalaureate degree and others do not.

Section 2: Methodology

Introduction

In this section, I explain the basic qualitative design to include the population from which the sample was taken; instruments used; and data collection, analysis, and verification methods. I restate the research questions and the purpose of the study. The study includes conclusions based on the study participants' experiences while on active duty stationed at an AFER and working toward completing baccalaureate degrees. This study was conducted to help the base's leadership at all levels understand the needs of military members working to complete baccalaureate degrees.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research is a suitable approach used by researchers to emphasize meaning and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative method was the most effective approach for this study because using the words of the participants paints a picture of the military members' education experiences and how they perceive the world around them. The research was exploratory; I explored the perspectives of active duty airmen on factors associated with completion of a baccalaureate degree. The problem explored in this study was the low baccalaureate degree completion rate at AFER. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. I investigated the following research questions to help address the problem and purpose of the study:

RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?

RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree?

RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?

I addressed the questions by exploring the various reasons enlisted Air Force students struggle to complete a degree at the baccalaureate level. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued that researchers seek to understand the experiences of their research subjects, how the participants define their surroundings, and how they interpret the world around them. Participants were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences in working toward degree completion while serving on active duty in the military.

Basic Qualitative Study

A qualitative study allows researchers to understand complex social problems and allows for a mixture of methods to examine the problem. Qualitative research allows researchers to examine a program, event, activity, process, or one or more people. In qualitative studies, researchers collect detailed information over a period of time (Creswell, 2009).

I focused on active duty enlisted personnel stationed at the AFER who have taken classes toward baccalaureate degrees. The basic qualitative study was the most effective choice for this research as I explored personal experiences of the participants and their perspectives on factors associated with completing baccalaureate degrees through

semistructured personal interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research is well suited to gain an in-depth understanding of educational experiences and what meaning the participants assign to them.

A basic qualitative design was the most appropriate for this research, as I used a systematic approach to describe the life experiences of the participants and give them meaning (Saldaña, 2011). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described a basic qualitative research study as having been derived from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction and as one used by researchers interested in how participants interpret their experiences and construct their worlds and what meaning they give their experiences. The purpose of educational qualitative research is to improve practice, and the basic qualitative research design can obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes.

I explored the depth and richness of the experiences of the participants' educational experiences to gain insight as to why there is a low degree completion rate at this particular Air Force base. I considered the case study; however, a case study was not the best approach as it requires multiple data collection methods (Yin, 2017). The research questions were able to be addressed with interviews, making a basic qualitative study more appropriate (see Saldaña, 2011). Ethnography was not considered appropriate, as data collection was via interviews and not by field observation (Saldaña, 2011). Lastly, document analysis was not appropriate as educational documentation for military students is vast and varied due to the thousands of institutions available for attendance and the lack of centralized student records at base locations.

Although quantitative research is valuable for testing theoretical models of persistence (Pascarella et al., 2011) and predicting persistence and student success (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the generated data do not fully capture the participants' personal experiences and only provide a superficial understanding of what has happened. Additionally, the personal perspectives of the students would not be revealed through these data. As an alternative, qualitative research provides an avenue to give voice to students in specific settings. Litchman (2013) revealed the complexity of their experiences and produced descriptive data that can paint a picture of more complex issues though within a narrower scope (Sallee & Flood, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2016) explained qualitative research as an interactive process between researcher and the participants; the process uses the words and observable behavior of the participants as the primary data. The basic qualitative design includes the interpretation of subjective opinions, beliefs, attitudes, or reflection on their experiences in the world (Percy et al., 2015). To discover factors the participants associated with personal academic success, interviews with military students provided insight that other methods could not. In this qualitative study, I focused on enlisted Air Force students' experiences in higher education and their perceptions of challenges, strategies, and choices to persist toward degree completion.

Participants

The participants in this study included 10 active duty Air Force personnel working toward their baccalaureate degrees. Their ages ranged from 21 to 36 years and their time serving on active duty ranged from 3 to 15 years. The inclusion criteria were

that they had completed a minimum of 24 semester hours of coursework and had taken a class in the past 12 months. Eight of the participants had completed an associate degree from the CCAF. Participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

Demographics

Participant ID	Gender	Years serving in the military	Years pursuing bachelor's degree	Number of colleges attended
P1	Male	3	3	3
P2	Male	15	15	2
P3	Female	6	7	2
P4	Male	9	7	2
P5	Male	14	12	2
P6	Female	7	6	5
P7	Male	6	7	5
P8	Male	14	13	3
P9	Female	8	1	4
P10	Female	3	4	3

Ten participants were included to gain appropriate depth of their educational experiences; I continued interviews until data saturation was reached. The actual number used depended upon data saturation. I determined 10 interviews effectively met the saturation requirement as no new information was added from participants at this point in

the process. According to Guest et al. (2006), saturation has become the standard by which samples are determined, and saturation occurs when interviews produce no new data, themes, or coding and the study can be replicated. Marshall et al. (2013) stressed the importance of justifying the sample size and its impact on data saturation in qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers generally focus on a smaller sample size to allow for the collection of rich descriptions of participant experiences (Taylor et al., 2015). Creswell (2013), however, suggested there is no definitive answer as to how many participants are enough. Instead, Creswell has taken the position that the qualitative design that is used might consist of 10 or fewer participants. Guest et al. (2006) stressed the richness of the data is more important than the number of participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted a question for new researchers in descriptive research regarding how many interviews, site visits, or documents should be reviewed. Merriam and Tisdell also noted that there is no definitive answer and that researchers need to ensure adequate number of participants to answer the research question.

I used the homogeneous sampling approach. This approach involved the purposeful sampling of individuals who are members of a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2009). The homogeneous sampling strategy was best for this study as all participants were serving on active duty in the U.S. Air Force, and I purposefully selected students who had completed at least 24 semester hours of coursework and who had taken a class in the past 12 months. Because the majority of active duty personnel work demanding schedules and deploy often, those who had taken a class in the past 12-month timeframe was set as a baseline. To gain depth of the

educational experiences, I only interviewed those who had completed at least 24 semester hours. This was important as it captured enlisted airmen who had taken courses in their major field of study versus those who had taken classes to complete their CCAF degree.

I am employed at the AFER in a nonsupervisory role. I retired from active duty in 2010; there are no active duty personnel assigned to the base who worked with me in a previous capacity as an educator or education counselor. Because of my military background and experience as a military education counselor, I was uniquely positioned to understand the culture and educational experiences of enlisted Air Force students. I recruited participants by placing a flyer at an off-base location frequently used by active duty military personnel. I contacted all airmen who expressed interest via email and the first 10 people who positively responded and met the criteria were asked to participate in the study. Any participant who I personally knew was excluded from the study. Volunteers were provided a consent form to complete prior to the interview. I used the homogeneous sampling approach, as only active duty personnel who had completed at least 24 semester hours and were enrolled within the past 12 months were selected for the study.

The gatekeeper for the research site is the base commander; according to the Walden University Office of Research Ethics and Compliance, the base commander needed to support the study and the Air Force Research Oversight and Compliance Division had to grant final approval through a Human Research Protection Official Review for me to conduct the research on base. A request for official permission to conduct the research was reviewed by the staff judge advocate and approved by the base

commander after all interview questions were finalized. The research site was moved to an offsite location as I could not get a response from the Air Force Research Oversight and Compliance Division after multiple requests.

Methods for Conducting Ethical Research

Prior to collecting any data from participants, I completed the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research training course on protecting human research participants (Appendix C). I conducted ethical research by protecting the privacy and rights of those involved in the study. Permission was first granted to conduct research from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was assigned approval number 02-28-20-0408718. Participants were made aware of any rights offered under data protection or copyright laws. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for identification to maintain confidentiality. All participants were required to provide informed consent prior to beginning the interview sessions. To protect the identity of participants all interview data and documents are stored in a locked file cabinet. I have exclusive access to keys for the file cabinet and passwords for data stored on a personal computer.

Data Collection

Interviews were the method of data collection as they provided rich, thick data in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and supported the discovery of the perspective and experiences of the participants (Taylor et al., 2015). The primary method to collect data was semi-structured interviews. I selected interviews rather than focus groups to maintain confidentiality and obtain open, honest answers from participants.

Based on the nature of military culture, research conducted by Hall (2011) indicated that focus groups would not be as effective as one-on-one interviews as confidentiality is valued in military culture.

After I received IRB approval from Walden University, I started the recruitment process for this study. The director of a local community center agreed to allow me to post recruitment flyers in her facility. I was only able to post the flyer for 6 days prior to the facility closing all customer service operations due to Covid-19 restrictions. I had four respondents to my flyer; however, I was able to gain an additional eight respondents due to these four individuals passing information about the study to active duty personnel they knew. I sent all interested participants an invitational email explaining the study and the criteria to participate. Of the 12 people who responded, 10 met the criteria for the study. Two were not suitable for this study as one had already completed their degree and one had only taken two classes.

I developed an interview protocol (Appendix D) to collect data. The eight open-ended interview questions were designed to measure the experiences of active duty airmen while working toward a baccalaureate degree. The questions were written to measure the feelings and attitudes of the participants with a focus on the research questions (Table 2). The questions were piloted by two enlisted students who had completed over 24 semester hours of coursework prior to conducting participant interviews.

Table 2.

Research Questions

Research question number	Research question	Interview question alignment
RQ1	What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?	Q4 What has slowed your progress or made getting a degree difficult? Q5 Can you tell me about a recent challenge you had to overcome in your degree program?
RQ2	What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree?	Q1 What decisions or choices do you feel you have made in order to persist toward completing your bachelor's degree? Q2 What strategies do you feel are important in order to persist in completing a bachelor's degree? Q3 How have you managed situations that impeded your progress toward degree completion? Q6 What do you perceive as factors that contribute to your academic success?
RQ3	What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?	Q7 What role has leadership played in your pursuit of a bachelor's degree? Q8 How do you feel leadership could further support your academic progress?

Interviews were not conducted prior to permission being granted from Walden University's IRB. The interviews were conducted at the off-site location. Participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interview. The consent form included time and date of the interview, a description of the purpose of the study; explained the

recording of interviews and how personal information will be protected. I used the interview protocol with interview questions I produced (Appendix D).

There are suggestions to help researchers professionally conduct interviews such as having a set plan for the process (Birt et al., 2016). I asked the eight predetermined questions (Appendix D) in order to have standardized interviews; however, because the questions were open ended, the participants were able to provide their feelings and opinions while answering the questions. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes and individual interviews were recorded on an Evistar digital voice recorder. I let the participants know that I would email them a transcript of the interview and that I would request they review the transcript and let me know if it was an accurate account of our interview.

All participants were assigned a pseudonym P1-P10 for the study. These numbers were based upon the order I interviewed the participants. The actual names of participants are located on the consent forms. These forms are maintained in a locked file cabinet in my personal home office.

The author of this research has over 25 years of combined experience as an Air Force enlisted veteran and as a Department of the Air Force civilian. I am a retired Air Force veteran who previously held a position as commandant for the AFER professional military education program. Additionally, I was previously employed as an education counselor at an overseas Air Force installation and was an adjunct faculty member for the University of Maryland University College Europe with an exclusive military student population. Currently the author is employed at the research base in a non-supervisory

role. I retired from active duty in 2010; there are no active duty personnel assigned to the base who worked with me in previous capacity as an educator or education counselor. Because of my military background and experience as a military education counselor, I was uniquely positioned to understand the culture and educational experiences of enlisted Air Force students. Throughout my career, I consistently encountered enlisted airmen with more than 100 semester hours of college coursework from multiple schools who were far from completing a degree. In order to avoid overfamiliarity, any potential participant known personally by me was excluded from the study. My experiences allowed for rapport with participants as well as a shared understanding of the unique military culture.

Qualitative researchers systematically organize and explore qualitative data to identify emergent themes or patterns in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Microsoft products and NVivo software aided in the organization and storage of data. The NVivo product allowed for secure storage of interview transcripts, research questions, codes, and notes. All paper and recorded data collected throughout the research will be maintained in a locked cabinet for 5 years after completion of the study. The data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Data Analysis

The inductive approach to data analysis was used. According to Lodico et al. (2010), the inductive approach is often referred to as a *bottom-up* approach as the researcher uses different observations to paint a picture of the phenomenon being studied. Saldaña (2011) explained induction as what one discovers and concludes to be

transferable from specific to general based on a thorough investigation of the data. Inductive thought and reason often lead to inductive ways to collect data; this allows the researcher to observe the problem being researched, search for common themes that exist throughout the observations, and develop a general concept from analysis of the themes that emerge. Braun and Clark (2006) urged researchers to follow the following process: (a) take the time to become fully acquainted with their data, (b) create codes from the data, (c) search for and categorize themes, (d) review themes, (e) define each of the themes, and (f) generate the final report. Data collected through interviews were analyzed and coded after all data were collected.

Following the six phases recommended by Braun and Clark (2006), I reviewed each recorded interview individually, transferred the file to my computer and secured the folder with a password. I transcribed each interview into separate Microsoft Word documents, using care to not use the name of the participants and titling the document by interview number. I sent each participant an email with their transcript and requested a response regarding accuracy and if requested, I would make changes to the transcript. All participants stated the transcript was accurate; no changes were made to the transcripts. All transcripts are stored on my personal computer in a password protected file. All data were deleted from the Evistar digital voice recorder.

According to Saldaña (2011), data analysis is accelerated, and researchers are able to notice details, discover patterns and categories, and understand how the data are interrelated. I answered the research questions using data from the semi-structured interviews. By manually transcribing each individual interview, I was able to look for

themes exploring the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. Although I had initially planned on using a coding software program, I decided to manually code the data in order to gain a deeper understanding of the data. As interviews were transcribed, read, and reread the data became intimately familiar to me.

I first used open coding by reviewing the interview transcripts searching for words and phrases that were emphasized by the participants, repeated words and phrases, expressive language, and perceptive phrases. I made notes on the transcripts and used brackets and different colors of highlighter to identify repeated words, phrases, or ideas from the transcripts. Creswell (2012) explained open coding as a process where, "The researcher bases categories on all data collected, such as interviews, observations, and researcher's memos or notes" (p. 425). This method used for developing initial codes helped capture the voices of the airmen I interviewed and gain a deeper insight into their experiences in pursuing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty.

After this first phase in the coding process, I then looked for themes using axial coding. Lodico et al. (2010) stated, "Coding can be used to find portions of data that explain relationships between data" (p. 305). Creswell (2013) defined axial coding as when the researcher "selects one open coding category, positions it at the center of the process being explored, and then relates other categories to it" (p. 617).

Axial coding was used to find links between the codes, sort for themes, and establish connections between collected data. As themes were discovered, I used different colors to help me organize the data supporting common themes. These themes were

developed by selecting an open category and mapping how it related to other categories. These themes were color coded and listed with references to each interview where they emerged. I took a break from the data analysis at this point and revisited the data after 10 days. I went through the data analysis process again; this allowed me to analyze the data with fresh eyes to reduce any interviewer bias in the process and to ensure clear results were achieved.

Discrepant cases are those that *run counter to the themes* or do not fit into any distinct category (Creswell, 2013). Discrepant cases were included in the findings and clearly identified as a counter perception to the theme. It was specifically stated when a participant had a vastly different experience or perception from the theme. There were two specific experiences that were different from the themes that emerged; they were included and explained in the final study.

Trustworthiness

Birt et al. (2016) explained the importance of accuracy when collecting and analyzing data; participant validation through a member check is one method to do this. In order to ensure that the findings were accurate, a member check was incorporated into the study. Member checking refers to the researcher confirming findings with research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Birt et al. (2016) described several methods to conduct member checks such as returning the interview transcript to participants, member check interviews, member check focus groups, and member check of synthesized analyzed data. Each participant in this study was provided a copy of the transcript from their interview and my interpretation of the data to confirm accuracy. I sent each

participant a copy of their individual transcript via email with instructions to provide me with any necessary changes. After the data were analyzed, the participants were provided a summary of data and had the opportunity to make corrections and provide clarifications to me to ensure the accuracy of interpretations.

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. The results of this study help to fill a gap in the literature on the experiences of active duty military personnel in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees and increase the understanding of the difficulty these airmen face in completing their degrees. Study findings contribute to knowledge in the field of higher education in terms of active duty students and may lead to positive social change. Those who stand to benefit from the findings of this research are active duty military personnel pursuing degrees, supervision of these personnel, leadership at the base level, and institutions who enroll active duty students. This research could lead to positive social change by assisting military leadership in the development of outreach programs to assist airmen in their pursuit of higher education

I sought to answer the following research questions in this basic qualitative study:

RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?

RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree?

RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?

This section focuses on the results of this study, including the themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews I conducted with active duty airmen. The setting of the study and an overview of data collection and analysis procedures is explained followed by the results of the study, confirmation of trustworthiness, and a summary of key points.

Setting

The participants in this study included 10 active duty Air Force personnel working toward their baccalaureate degrees. The inclusion criteria were that they had completed a minimum of 24 semester hours of coursework and had taken a class in the past 12 months. Participant demographics are provided in Table 1. The study was conducted at an Air Force base with an active duty operational mission. Interviews were conducted at an off-base community center in a private office.

Data Collection and Analysis

After I received IRB approval from Walden University, I recruited 10 participants for interviews at an off-base community center. After gaining signed consent forms from each participant, I conducted interviews using a self-developed interview protocol (Appendix D). All interviews were recorded. I manually transcribed each recorded interview individually and answered the research questions using data from the semi-structured interviews.

I coded the data and themes began to emerge. The themes were directly related to the research questions. The themes related to RQ1 are the obligations that military members face and a lack of knowledge about higher education. Themes related to RQ2 are support systems and personal goals to drive motivation. The themes related to RQ3 are positive support received and ways leadership can better support enlisted education.

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?

RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree?

RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?

These questions were developed with the goal of exploring the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. Table 3 shows the codes and themes that emerged through the data analysis process.

Table 3.

Codes and Themes

Research question number	Themes	Codes
RQ1	Obligations	Family Military duties Deployments
RQ1	Lack of knowledge about higher education	First in family to attend college Multiple college transfers Eligibility to use TA
RQ2	Support systems	Family Peers Base agencies
RQ2	Personal goals driving motivation	Personal achievement Employment after military service Career advancement Ability to transfer GI Bill benefits
RQ3	Positive support from leadership	Provided time for academics awards and promotions
RQ3	How leadership Can better support	Schedules Education programs at squadron

Themes

While analyzing the data, six themes emerged: obligations, lack of knowledge about higher education, support systems, personal goals driving motivation, positive support from leadership, and ways leadership can better support enlisted personnel

toward degree completion. The themes support the research questions and are presented as such.

RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree? Obligations and lack of knowledge about higher education were themes that emerged that support RQ1; these themes related to challenges the participants perceived in completing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force.

Obligations. All of the participants said that obligations were a significant challenge in completing a degree. The duties required in military service are extremely demanding and unpredictable. There was a consistent premise of struggle and sacrifice because of military obligations, deployments, and family responsibilities. Many of the participants found times when working toward a degree was impossible because of work schedules and deployments. Although all of the airmen in this study eventually found strategies to make attending school possible despite these obligations, for many progress was slow and all participants had to stop progress toward completing a degree multiple times.

As a single parent and military supervisor, P3 shared her experience trying to balance her military and family obligations with attending college. She said, "I had to make sure I had enough time with all of my military commitments, it's definitely taken a toll on me and my family." She found herself physically ill at one point because of the stress related to taking classes, working in the military, and being a single parent. She had to find creative strategies to be able to find time for school such as finding other single

parents to share childcare and send her children to her parents for periods when there simply was not any time for family and school on top of military duties. She has experienced guilt for sending her children away for months at a time so she could balance work and school.

Having a changing work schedule was a significant challenge for P10. He explained difficulty with finding a way to balance school with a schedule that is constantly changing. He would often work 12 hour shifts during the day followed by 12 hour shifts at night, with a couple days off at the end of the cycle. He worked rotating 12-13 hour shifts without a day off for 2 months at one point because of an organization restructure. He was unable to take any classes during this time. He explained the job an airman has in the Air Force makes a difference in the amount of time spent at work and the expectations for availability. For airmen assigned duties such as security, aircraft maintenance, and air traffic control, schedules often change with no notice and those airmen are expected to be available all the time to report to work. Airmen who work in an office setting tend to have more time for school and have set schedules during the normal work week.

> I would say there's a lot of things in the military that will get in your way and try to delay your goal. It is more difficult for people who have a mission essential job. When you also add in being a supervisor and doing all the things you have to do to get promoted it is much harder to go to school. I have had to take school very slow because of my schedule and the many demands in my job.

In addition to regular duties during the work day, many airmen have additional duties that must be accomplished after the shift. P4 explained the many additional duties such as safety monitor, fitness manager, and facility manager he has in addition to regular job requirements. P4 said the "workload was too much to go to school." P4 had to take a long break from working toward his degree due to the multiple training requirements associated with the job as a new airman. He had to drop several classes and had anxiety about signing up for future classes. His biggest concern was not being able to meet school requirements because of being called back to work for mission or personnel issues. He had to pay back tuition for one of the classes he dropped because of a schedule change. The experience set him back financially and psychologically. He almost quit going to school because of this experience.

The unknown timing and duration of deployments was cited as a factor in causing multiple delays for extended periods. The research base has an operational and combat mission that requires heavy deployment rotations for most of the airmen assigned. P8 shared how it seemed impossible to go to school consistently because of the multiple deployments. He has attended three different schools and has lost considerable credit with each transfer. Through these experiences he decided to complete his degree completely online. The first programs did not have robust distance learning programs and he found it impossible to continue with multiple deployments and military relocations.

> I've been trying to get a degree for 13 years. I had so many deployments and
> moves that I had a lot of credits expire and I had to start all over three times. I had

to learn how to be an online student and take no more than one class at a time.

The school I am at now is really understanding of how the military works.

Multiple deployments was a recurring theme for the participants. P2 had a similar experience with deployments delaying degree progress. P2 had started taking classes shortly after enlisting in the military 15 years ago and is hoping to finish his degree in the next 3 years.

I deployed to places that did not have internet access and had to drop classes

many times. I think I have deployed 7 times for over 6 months at a time. Once I

was gone for almost a year and a half. It is really hard when you deploy a lot.

P6 had a different experience than any of the other participants regarding deployments. She found that volunteering for extended deployments was the only way to make progress toward her degree. She volunteered for deployments that would give her time away from family obligations and supervisory military duties. Her job is administrative when she deploys, and she found more time to dedicate to her education goals when she was away.

Several of the participants named family needs and demands as making progress toward a degree difficult. The participants included a combination of family structures to include single parents, parents who were married to another military member, divorced parents with partial custody situations, and those with no children. P2 discussed his difficulty balancing family, military, and school obligations.

One year ago, we had twins and that was a large change. Babies take up time. My

wife is a stay at home mom but with 4 kids that takes up a lot of your personal

time. Throughout the last year that is something that has caused me to slow down. I took a break when they were born. I chose to dedicate all my time to my family. Especially those first few months.

Family obligations are a significant challenge for single parents. P3 is a single parent who typically works over 50 hours a week. Her job involves short notice schedule changes depending upon the mission. She shared an example of when family obligations caused an extended delay in her academic progress. She decided to take a break while on maternity leave after having a child. She postponed going back to school for much longer than she had planned; throwing her over a year behind her plan for degree completion.

Another single parent who experienced great difficulty trying to balance family and school was P8. He had an unhealthy response to the stress of working long shifts, working on coursework, and trying to spend any possible time with his children. He became depressed and quit taking classes completely for several years. He wanted to complete his degree and knew it was important for his future but felt the lack of balance was unhealthy for his children and himself as he had no time for his family. He was unable to return to school until he later remarried and had a supportive spouse to help him find a healthy balance.

Family obligations created guilt for P9. She had difficulty justifying spending her time on a personal goal when she felt she should be spending time with her children when not at work. One example of this was when she had her second child.

I had a baby last year, so I didn't take any classes. I probably could have taken advantage of the time off and taken at least one class, but I did not. I chose to spend time with my baby.

She admitted she is still working through these lasting effects of having to put herself over her children in order to move forward and shared that she feels guilt when she misses out on time with her children. She also admitted she has cut corners academically and submitted subpar assignments to make time for her children. P9 explained, sometimes she has to "let something slip" to make time for everything else. She is still trying to find a healthy balance between school and family while serving in the military.

All of the participants named obligations as a challenge to completing a degree. Military duties, deployment, and family commitments were a common theme. Each participant shared examples and explained how the extensive requirements of military service made it very difficult to take classes. The contractual nature of military service demands mission requirements be placed over personal obligations such as family and school. In most cases, school was delayed multiple times for extended periods.

The experiences participants shared regarding obligations to military duties, family and deployments making it difficult to complete a degree supports RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree?

The study participants all shared examples of how they struggled to work toward a degree while serving in the Air Force. Airmen identified obligations to military duties and having a heavy military workload as challenging when attending school. Also,

having unpredictable schedules and frequent deployments often slowed or stopped progress toward degree completion. According to Volk et al. (2020), military students have more difficulty than their nonmilitary counterparts with completing coursework and reaching academic goals due to a lack of flexibility in work hours and short notice deployments. Many military students prefer a traditional class format but enroll in online classes because of schedules and deployments (Hembrough et al., 2018). Family obligations were significant challenges because sacrificing precious time with children to attend school created difficulty for many of the airmen. Approximately half of all military learners are married, 47% have children, and about 13% are divorced or separated (Cate & Davis, 2016). The airmen experienced anxiety, depression, guilt, and financial cost as they worked to develop strategies to overcome the challenges related to balancing these obligations with attending school.

In respect to the conceptual framework of this study, not being able to attend class because of demanding work schedules and deployments as well as obligations to family responsibilities are challenges that had a negative impact on the stress and ultimately delayed progress toward degree completion. These challenges are in line with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model as the psychological outcomes of goal commitment and stress are directly impacted by the environmental variables of hours of employment and family responsibilities. The more difficult the environment is for the student equates to a greater probability for the student to leave an academic program (Arminio et al., 2015). Environmental variables are relevant challenges shared by the participants. According to Cornell-d' Echert (2012),

military students often struggle to balance family obligations and military requirements such as established work hours, deployments, training, physical fitness, supervision duties, and being on call 24 hours a day. Academic variables of study habits, absenteeism, major uncertainty, course availability, and academic advising are influenced by environmental factors. Arminio et al. (2015) found that academic variables have significant impact on academic outcomes and overall persistence for nontraditional students; making degree completion more difficult for students with challenges in these areas.

Lack of Knowledge About Higher Education. Having a lack of knowledge about higher education was perceived as a challenge to completing a degree and aligns with RQ1. Being the first person in the family to attend college, attending multiple colleges, and losing TA eligibility presented as challenges related to this lack of knowledge and experience with education. All of the participants enlisted in the Air Force directly after graduating from high school and experienced delays and frustration in working toward degree goals because of a lack of knowledge about higher education. Although all participants cited education as a reason for enlisting, most had no exposure to higher education prior to enlisting. Six of the participants shared they were the first person in their family to attend college and all of the participants admitted to regretting choices in academic programs or format due to a lack of understanding. These choices cost time and expended benefits toward useful degrees.

Multiple transfers were common among the participants. P6 and P7 have attended five different colleges and are still over a year from completing their degrees. Because

they had no counseling or experience regarding the usefulness or employment options related to certain degrees, neither are pursuing a degree in a field they want to work in after they leave the military. P7 said he was told to sign up for the current program because it is the only one he can finish prior to separating. P6, P9, and P10 assumed they had to get a degree in the same field as their Air Force job; however, none of them want to continue in those fields with civilian employment. P9 shared her dissatisfaction with the degree she is working toward.

> I thought I had to get a degree related to my job, so I started with that. I have always known that I do not want to work in law enforcement after I leave the military but thought Criminal Justice was the only option I had. When I learned I could change my program I started one I want but after a year into it I realized I was unable to finish because it requires seated lab work that was impossible to complete due to my work schedule and moving. I had to switch to a program I could complete that degree completely online, but I will not have the degree I wanted. I will also run out of TA benefits and will have to pay out of pocket or use my GI Bill to finish it.

Many of the participants did not know the benefits they had for education or the best way to use them. None of the participants knew that they could use financial aid in conjunction with TA benefits. There was also a lack of understanding regarding how to navigate college policies regarding how to withdraw from classes due to deployment or relocation costing money and negative impact to their GPA. Two participants lost eligibility to use TA due to dropping below the required 2.0 GPA; however, they later

learned they could have grade replaced the failed courses using financial aid and kept their benefit. P6 was the only participant incurring personal cost for tuition. This was due to attempting multiple degree goals and using all of her TA benefit. She lacked a clear understanding of the employment possibilities associated with the programs she was pursuing. This lack of understanding about benefits and how to navigate the university policies cost not only money but considerable time the participants could have been working toward completing their degrees.

The experiences regarding having a lack of knowledge about higher education as a challenge to completing a degree supports RQ1: What factors do Air Force enlisted airmen perceive as challenges to completing their baccalaureate degree? All of the airmen admitted to having limited experience with higher education, education benefits, and the programs available. Being the first person in the family to attend college, attending multiple colleges, and losing TA eligibility presented as challenges related to this lack of knowledge and experience with education. All of the participants joined the military with no college experience after graduating from high school and over half of the airmen were the first person to attend college in their family. This is supported by the literature as many enlisted military members are the first in their family to attend college (Levitan, 2017). Because of not having a foundation of understanding about different programs, most of the participants transferred multiple times in their journey to complete a degree. Additionally, being underprepared to take courses in an online format negatively impacted the GPA of some of the participants creating eligibility issues for education

benefits. First generation college students typically struggle with managing their time and studying efficiently (Holzer & Baum, 2017).

In view of the conceptual framework of this study, understanding how to use education benefits and having an understanding of higher education practices would have been beneficial toward degree completion. These factors were challenges that align with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model as the environmental variable of finances is impacted negatively with loss of TA benefits. Additionally, academic variables such as study habits, absenteeism, major uncertainty, course availability, and academic advising feed directly into academic outcomes thus having a negative impact on the educational goals of the participants. Gibbs et al. (2019) found that many enlisted personnel are unaware of how to use their education benefits. Without adequate counseling and experience many military students perform poorly academically and make poor choices utilizing their education benefits (Jones, 2017).

RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree? Support systems and personal goals to drive motivation were themes that support RQ2. These themes related to strategies enlisted airmen found important to completing a baccalaureate degree.

Support Systems. All of the participants stated that support systems were the most significant reason they could attend school. The airmen relied on family, friends, and base agencies to support their pursuit of higher education goals. The military is a cooperative community with many support systems in place. In addition to formal

support such as the education center, library, childcare facilities, and family day care; all of the participants also found great support from family, coworkers, and friends.

Having help from family and friends was important to P3. She shared that she does not have any spare time to spend with her friends and family because she is either working or at school. She relies on friends watching her children and using the childcare resources on the base when they are unable to help her. She and other single parents formed a group to support each other by taking turns hosting play dates and caring for each other's children. She also said her parents were very supportive of her education and would take her children for the Summer so she could focus on schoolwork.

Having a supportive spouse was very important for P8. He has a very understanding spouse who takes care of the many responsibilities at home and with their children. He said, "I have an amazing wife who picks up the slack so that I can try to finish this degree. Definitely having a support system; that is paramount. I couldn't do it without that support system for sure." They have an agreement that after he completes his degree, they will find a way for her to go to school. They both desire an education but realize the family needs the dedicated support of one parent to take the lion's share of the household responsibilities while the other spouse concentrates on work and school.

Having the support of friends and family was also important for P9. She has coworkers that help her with additional duties to give her some extra time when she needs it. She and her husband are both serving on active duty and use the base family childcare program when they are at work. The base offers "safe childcare provided by licensed military spouses who live on base." Having military spouses who understand

their unique work demands make it possible for her and her husband to serve in the military simultaneously while raising children. She said, "There is not a civilian daycare within our budget that is open for our crazy military work hours." Her husband takes care of the children when she is spending time on school requirements. When he is unavailable because of deployments or military work commitments, she has friends and family help with caring for her children. To make the most of her time, she goes to the base library to study because it is quiet, and she can go there after work or on her lunch hour. Having these support systems available is important for her academic success.

Although all of the participants acknowledged the importance of having support, they also shared the need for developing a time management strategy to truly find a healthy balance between obligations and school requirements. P1 explained how he plans when to take classes strategically and plan way ahead around busy periods for the base and in his life. His job gets very busy at the same time each year; he and his coworkers plan around those busy months and know there is no time for taking classes during that time. He is single and does not have children but said he relies upon the positive support and encouragement of his friends and coworkers to be successful in school. He also provides support by helping his coworkers who have children by taking on their additional duties or picking up extra shifts to give them some extra time for school and family.

The examples of support systems needed to complete a degree supports RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree? Having reliable support from family, friends, and

base agencies was important for the airmen who participated in this study. In most cases, the airmen had to stop taking classes when they lacked this support. The military is a cooperative community with many support systems in place (Neill-Harris et al., 2016) on base and in the community. In addition to formal support from agencies such as the education center, library, childcare facilities, and family day care; all of the participants also found support from family, coworkers, and friends critical to their progress toward a degree.

Considering the conceptual framework of this study, having the ability to take the time to consistently attend class because of the support of family, friends, and available resources align with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model. Being able to attend school while serving in the military requires the ability to work multiple schedules and deploy while working toward degree completion. Environmental variables of finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer are all impacted by the level of support an airman receives to work toward degree completion. Additionally, academic variables of study habits, absenteeism, academic advising, and major uncertainty are impacted by having support to fully engage in academic programs. The environmental and academic variables, when well supported, in turn positively impact psychological and academic outcomes thus having a positive effect on the educational goals of the participants.

Personal Goals Driving Motivation. The participants perceived personal goals driving motivation as an answer to RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree? Personal

goals include the personal achievement of completing a degree, having a degree to prepare for employment after military service, career enhancement, and taking advantage of TA benefits to reach goals while on active duty in order to transfer Post 9/11 GI Bill education benefits to family members. The participants gave specific examples of how their personal goals impact motivation to complete a degree while serving on active duty.

The achievement of completing a degree was an important factor driving motivation for P5. He will be the first in his family to complete a college degree. He told me how the goal of completing a degree is a driving force and keeps him motivated to make time for college despite any personal sacrifice.

> It's a personal goal for me to get my degree. It means a lot to me because when I came in that was not something that was a priority. When I came in the military and before coming into the military, school was the farthest from my mind. I was one of those people who was told that's not the route you're going because of where I am from. I don't want to say the world told me that; however, I was geared to go a different path because nobody in my family ever went to school. So, for me to come to the Air Force and actually get my degree, it shows a lot of maturing, a lot of overcoming, a lot of proven doubt. I guess I am putting discredit to a lot of doubt. I took something to better myself; it's a personal thing.

The personal goal to complete a degree was a motivating factor for P10. He is the first in his family to go to college and shared the importance of getting a degree and how this goal motivates him to keep moving forward. He also revealed how setting an example for his children and younger siblings is also a driving factor to be successful. He explained

how his children see him working on his schoolwork when they wake up in the morning and how that has influenced their academic performance. His children join him after dinner to do their schoolwork while he is working on his. They have a positive view regarding school and value the opportunity to reach academic goals.

> I would never have had the opportunity to go to college without the military. The thing that I just had to keep doing is just keeping my head screwed on and having the end goal kept in mind through the whole thing. Being in a positive environment, having your goals set, and never giving up. Just keeping motivated and staying positive through it. I joined to get my degree. I want my family to have better opportunities than I did; I want my kids to want to go to school.

The majority of the participants said they want to complete their degree to prepare them for a career after the military. P3 explained her motivation is to have a backup option if she decides to leave the Air Force. She said, "The military is not an easy way to live and I don't know how long I can continue to serve." She has two more years on her enlistment and will have to make a decision to either reenlist or transition to the civilian sector. She was motivated to be prepared for the future and be able to support her family after military service. P8 explained he realized that he is at the end of his career. With 15 years in the military, he has to prepare for life after retirement in a few years. He previously transferred his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to his children and will not have any education benefits after he leaves the military. He explained that he will need to work full time after he retires from the military because his retirement income will be less than half of what he currently earns. His goal is to have the ability to financially maintain his

current lifestyle and he knows he cannot do that without a degree. P6, P7, P9, and P10

also shared that completing their degrees prior to leaving active duty is important because

they plan to transfer their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to their children. P2 said he needs to

complete all the education he can while on active duty because his Post 9/11 GI Bill

benefits were exhausted by his former spouse. He said his military experience has taught

him discipline and the importance of having a strong work ethic. He said, "having self-

discipline to do it and do it well, not just for while I am in the Air Force but for after the

Air Force have been factors for me staying motivated."

Although several participants mentioned the benefit of being competitive for

awards and promotion as a positive aspect of completing a degree, P7 is the only

participant who conveyed the reason to complete a degree as a driving factor for

advancement in the military. He explained his military journey as a positive experience

because of the mentorship and development he has received. He wants to apply for a

commission; however, the process is extremely competitive, and completion of a

bachelor's degree is a requirement for becoming a commissioned officer in the military.

> I would have to say it's my personal goal to not only graduate but to be the top in
>
> my class. I would love to attend Officer Training School; I would love to
>
> commission. So, with that, I am really striving to finish this degree and do well so
>
> that I can have a competitive package.

The examples of personal goals having an impact on motivation to complete a

degree supports RQ2: What strategies do Air Force enlisted airmen consider important if

they are to persist in completing a baccalaureate degree? All of the participants found

personal goal driven motivation to be an important factor in their persistence. Cordie et al. (2018) found a direct relationship between internal motivation of nontraditional students and their personal and professional life. Personal goals such as the personal achievement of completing a degree, having a degree to prepare for employment after military service, career enhancement, and taking advantage of TA benefits to reach goals while on active duty in order to transfer Post 9/11 GI Bill education benefits to family members were shared as a driving force for motivating airmen to complete a degree. It is most advantageous for military members to use TA benefits while on active duty and save the Post 9/11 GI Bill to transfer to a family member or use for a postgraduate or technical degree after leaving the military (Jones, 2017). This motivation to complete their degree while on active duty helped airmen push forward toward degree completion.

Considering the conceptual framework of this study, these examples align with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model as the psychological outcome of goal commitment is the common defining variable. Remaining on active duty allows for continued enrollment using military tuition assistance; this benefit pays for classes allowing airmen to complete a degree at no cost. Completion of a degree on active duty also allows transfer of Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to family members without sacrificing personal education goals (Jones, 2017).

RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership? Positive support from leaders and how support from leadership could be improved are themes that align with RQ3. These were themes perceived by enlisted airmen regarding support from their leadership in completing a

degree.

Positive Support from Leadership. All of the participants said support from their leadership was an important factor for reducing difficulty in completing a degree; answering RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership? The airmen shared a deep respect for their military leaders and the many responsibilities they have. The immediate supervisor is the first leader for each of the airmen followed by a strict chain of command to the squadron commander. All of the participants shared their understanding of how much influence the squadron commander has over all aspects of unit operations and policies. The most significant support that participants shared was time to attend school. Having the ability to work toward completing a degree was helpful to the airmen and encouraged further enrollments. Additionally, the airmen valued leadership rewarding education with promotions and awards. Many of the participants were motivated to continue toward their education goals because of the positive messaging from their leadership tying education to professional development and career enhancement in the military.

Having a positive overall experience with squadron leadership, P6 was very appreciative of the level of support her unit leadership provides. Her leadership is aware that she takes classes and is very responsive with approving her TA and allowing her to take as many classes as she desires. She is thankful her leadership provides time and resources to work on school assignments.

> They are super supportive. They do give me time if I need it. Like I said, I usually
>
> take it at the end of the day when nobody's there, but they are very supportive of

that and they understand the need to have at least a four-year degree. If there is anything that I need, if I need to take a little extra time during work or whatever, they will allow it.

Having the ability to have time to attend traditional classes was important to P9. She praised her leadership for allowing time during the workday to take classes in person versus online. She said the commander is very supportive of her education and has had multiple mentoring sessions with people in the squadron to help enlisted airmen be successful in their education goals. He provides the time to attend class or to work on assignments as long as the mission gets accomplished.

I have had leadership who has supported my education and the needs that I have. Like when they have allowed me the flexibility to attend class when I needed to attend class because I don't feel that I'm good necessarily at online learning. I feel like I'm better at in person classes. Having leadership who understood and supported that and allowed me to do what I needed to do, obviously based upon the mission.

Mentorship from leadership and supporting time for him to dedicate to academic goals was an important factor for P7. He has had excellent support from all levels of leadership throughout his career. His supervisors were knowledgeable about how to use military education benefits and his commander suggested he work toward applying for a commission. He was given time to learn about education opportunities and how they correlate to civilian employment. He said, "If I am able to ever become a leader in the Air Force I will encourage my people to go to school. That is the most impactful thing that

my leaders have done for me. I know most people in the military may not have that kind of support, but they should." P7 said he would not have known to work toward a commission had it not been for the support of leadership. He had not considered the possibility of getting a degree, let alone becoming an officer in the Air Force. Because the positive message regarding getting an education is a part of the squadron culture, he has felt supported from all levels of leadership. He was told that if he wanted to be successful in the military, he had to get an education.

Not all of the participants had positive experiences with support from leadership but agreed that time is one support that is important for leadership to provide. P3 said it would be helpful to be able to watch lectures or complete some schoolwork at work. She said being allowed to access academic sites or do some work on a break or during lunch would be helpful. She requested permission to work on assignments during her lunch but was not allowed. In regard to her squadron leadership allowing time to work on assignments she said, "They make sure we do that outside of work and there is no flexibility." She said her progress would have been much faster had she had the support of leadership regarding time.

Another positive support from leadership was the importance placed on education for awards and promotion. P1 said that his leadership promotes enlisted airmen going to school for career enhancement, "You can put education on your performance rating." These ratings have a direct impact on promotions and make airmen competitive for awards. In another squadron, school was promoted specifically for professional development by leadership. P2 said, "I feel like every time you turn around someone is

telling you to use your education benefits and to go to school. They push it a lot because of promotions and awards." He saw push for going to class as a positive factor because many of his coworkers had no aspirations of getting a degree. His leadership specifically pushed for completion of a CCAF degree for promotions; taking the classes to get a CCAF degree taught P2 how to navigate education benefits, inspired him to research different options for a bachelor's degree, and motivated him to push toward degree completion. He said, "without that education push for awards, I would never have gone to college."

Having support from leadership to have the time to attend class and promoting college as a way to advance one's military career was viewed by participants as a positive influence toward degree completion. These experiences support RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership? Having time provided to work toward completing a degree was important to the airmen and encouraged progress. The participants saw value in positive messaging from their leadership with rewarding education with promotion opportunities and award nominations.

Considering the conceptual framework of this study, leadership providing airmen time to work on their degree and encouraging college attendance by using a reward structure for promotions and award recognition aligns with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model. Additionally, environmental variables such as hours of employment, outside encouragement, and opportunity to transfer and academic variables of study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major

uncertainty, and course availability are positively impacted by the support received from leadership thus having a positive impact on the educational goals of the participants.

How Leadership can Better Support Degree Completion. The participant perceptions of how leadership could better support degree completion aligns with RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership? The majority of participants felt a great deal of support from leadership. A consideration for how to improve degree completion needs to be how participants suggest they could be better supported. It is important to note that squadrons have different challenges, and two participants felt their leadership was fully supportive and had no suggestions for improvement. There were, however two main suggestions for how leadership could better support degree completion: providing some flexibility with schedules and incorporating education program information at the unit level. Several participants conveyed rigid policy regarding work schedules as a challenge. The schedules of military personnel vary greatly depending upon their job. For example, for those working on the flight line in aircraft maintenance or airmen assigned to security forces, it is common to work 12-13 hour shifts for five to six days in a row followed by two or three days off. On their off days they are required to complete military training such as fitness testing, firearm qualifications, and deployment readiness training. This is certainly a challenge, but flexibility in scheduling when the mission allows was suggested for leadership to consider as an opportunity to better support degree completion.

The second suggestion provided by the participants to better support successful degree completion was for leadership to provide education support and information at the

squadron level. The structure of many squadrons does not permit airmen to attend education briefings or counseling offered at the education center during the traditional work week. Many of the participants suggested having information and resources available at the squadron to support their education goals.

Unpredictable schedules were cited as challenges related to military obligations. Some participants experienced more difficulty than other depending on the job or squadron they were assigned to. P3 felt the squadron leadership could be more supportive of airmen attending school in regard to work schedules. The commander has the ability to set and change shifts and schedules to allow airmen to attend classes. Because of frequent changes to work schedules and long shifts, taking classes is very difficult. It was suggested that if an airman is approved for a class using TA, then their schedule should remain stable until that class is completed if the mission allows. Schedule stability was also important for participants who needed an occasional seated class. P3 said having the ability to take a seated lab or a difficult class would be very helpful. She had difficulty taking an upper-level science class in an online format and would have benefitted with the assistance of an in-person professor. The class was offered on base, but her schedule did not permit her time to attend in person.

All of the participants said the Air Force mission always should come before their voluntary education endeavors. However, if the mission allows for some flexibility, it should be afforded to those taking classes.

It was also suggested that leadership could better support the degree completion of enlisted airmen by having education program and benefit information at the squadron.

Several of the participants stated they had not had any briefings or education information shared at the unit and they had to actively seek out information. P1 said "I think it would be very beneficial to the Air Force to maybe incorporate programs into squadron level and support their Airmen to get an education." The education center is not open for shift workers and it is not feasible to leave work on the flight line to see an education counselor. Most of his coworkers currently taking classes sign up for online programs without any education counseling. He said many of his coworkers who attempted online classes did not perform well because this was their first time in school since graduating from high school. A similar experience was shared by P6. She found most of the time the expectation is for supervisors to share information about education with new airmen. Unfortunately, most supervisors have very little experience with the higher education process or education benefits. Airmen who work for a supervisor knowledgeable about education programs are more likely exposed to quality information at the squadron. It was suggested to have the support from squadron leadership to have education shared at the squadron. To have education briefings about programs and benefits as well as having a counselor available to meet with shift workers was recommended as a way leadership could better support enlisted airmen with degree completion.

From his experiences, P3 said having someone at the squadron who could "help me out with class decisions and strategies for balancing school and family" would be helpful. It would also be beneficial to be able to get some information from the education center at work. Having programs and information at the unit is something leadership could provide that would help enlisted airmen complete their education goals.

With the many different schedules and requirements of each individual squadron, the participants suggested leadership at that level be involved as a supporting role in enlisted education. Based on their experiences as students serving in the Air Force, the participants suggested leadership consider allowing flexibility in schedules for airmen attending college. According to Volk et al. (2020), the lack of flexibility in work hours makes it more difficult for military students to complete coursework and reach academic goals than their nonmilitary counterparts. Additionally, participants suggested leadership support having an education program at the squadron level as a way to better support degree completion. Nontraditional learners find better success when provided organizational support, availability of resources, and open communication (Holzer & Baum, 2017). The suggested education program would provide information and advising to airmen where they work. The participants' suggestions of leadership supporting flexibility in work schedules as well as having an education program at the squadron that is accessible to shift workers aligns with RQ3: What support for completing a baccalaureate degree do Air Force enlisted airmen receive from their leadership?

Considering the conceptual framework of this study, leadership supporting schedule flexibility aligns with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model. Environmental variables in the areas of hours of employment, outside encouragement, and opportunity to transfer would be positively impacted by providing schedule flexibility and having an education program at the squadron level. Additionally, having a squadron level education program addresses academic variables such as study habits, major uncertainty, course availability, and academic advising

positively which improves academic outcomes thus having a positive impact on the educational goal.

Conclusion

The findings of this study paralleled the literature review content. The literature review in Section 1 explained the military culture, education benefits available to those serving on active duty, and identified a gap in practice at the research base that may contribute to the degree completion rates at that location. The review did uncover a great deal of research related to education and military members; however, more research is needed in the future in order to understand the challenges related to degree completion for those serving on active duty in the military and create additional strategies to assist military personnel in completion of a baccalaureate degree.

The analysis of interview data revealed six themes that aligned with the research questions: obligations, lack of knowledge about higher education, support systems, personal goals driving motivation, positive support from leadership, and ways leadership can better support enlisted personnel toward degree completion.

The themes of obligations and lack of knowledge about higher education related to challenges the participants perceived in completing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force and align with RQ1. Obligations included military duties, deployments, and family responsibilities that made working toward a degree more difficult. The lack of knowledge about higher education was experienced by participants being the first in their family to attend college, attendance at multiple colleges and degree

programs through transfers due to uninformed choices, and poor performance due to inappropriate course and format selections that had negative impacts on TA eligibility.

Support systems and personal goals to drive motivation were themes related to strategies enlisted airmen found important to completing a baccalaureate degree while serving in the military; these themes align with RQ2. Support systems included family, friends, and base agencies that helped the airmen have time and energy to work toward degree completion. Personal goals included the personal achievement of completing a degree, having a degree to prepare for employment after military service, career enhancement, and taking advantage of TA benefits to reach goals while on active duty in order to transfer Post 9/11 GI Bill education benefits. The participants found motivation and drive to continue towards the goal of completing a degree because of these personal goals.

Positive support from leaders and how support from leadership could be improved are themes perceived by enlisted airmen regarding support from their leadership in completing a degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force; these themes align with RQ3. Positive support from leadership included providing time for airmen to work toward their degree and rewarding education through promotions and award nominations. Participants also suggested leaders have education programs at the squadron level that are accessible for airmen who are typically unable to get services from the education center.

The findings will be presented in a white paper to inform military leadership at the research base of the study, data that emerged, and recommendations will be presented to help leadership support enlisted airmen in the completion of a baccalaureate degree.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand enlisted personnel serving in the United Sates Air Force's perceptions of their challenges in completing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty. For this study, I collected and analyzed data from semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The findings of this study revealed that enlisted airmen perceive the need for support and resources at the squadron level to address the challenges of completing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty. These findings informed the position paper developed to support enlisted airmen at the squadron level in their pursuit of reaching higher education goals.

In this section, I present the rationale for the selection of a position paper with recommendations for the leadership at the research base as the deliverable to present the research. Additionally, this section contains a literature review related to the appropriateness of a position paper as the selected strategy, how the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model is related to the position paper, and how the position paper addresses the findings of the research. The research and review of the literature support the benefit of providing a position paper and presentation for leadership at the research base.

Rationale

A position paper or *white paper* presents a compelling point of view based on research to provide uncommon insights to a problem and solutions to solve it (Buday et al., 2018). This format places the entire argument in one place for policy makers and

influencers to read, demonstrates the veracity of the research and analysis of data, and provides a complete examination of the problem and possible solutions (Department of the Air Force, 2016). Air Force Handbook 33-337, also referred to as the *Tongue and Quill* is the communication standard used throughout the organization. Since the first publication of this reference in 1995, the Air Force has recognized the value of the position paper as an essential tool to raise an idea for consideration, advocate a situation, or take a stand on an issue (Department of the Air Force, 2016). The position paper was determined the most appropriate project to present this research because of the established and accepted use of this format in the Air Force.

The problem addressed in the position paper is directly related to the challenges enlisted airmen face while pursuing a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force. Obligations related to military duties, deployments, and family responsibilities and a lack of knowledge about higher education are challenges identified by the study participants in completing a baccalaureate degree. The findings of this study are an ideal topic for a position paper as the challenges identified by the participants could be addressed at the squadron level. The study results suggest involvement and engagement regarding education at the squadron level would assist enlisted airmen with degree completion; the position paper provides a recommended plan to accomplish this.

The six themes that emerged through analysis of the data suggest the majority of airmen struggle with finding time to complete a degree; additionally, there is a perception of a lack of adequate education counseling, access to resources, and information on education programs and benefits. Although counseling services are available at the Base

Education Office, the participants expressed difficulty using these services due to duty schedules. The findings suggest a gap in practice exists. The goal of the position paper is to provide strategies for solutions and provide recommendations for policy.

Review of the Literature

This literature review presents information from published articles regarding position papers, the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model, and workplace education programs. The literature review provides support of the selection of a position paper as the appropriate strategy for addressing the challenges of enlisted airmen in completing a baccalaureate degree while serving in the military. Additionally, an analysis of how Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model supports the elements of the position paper is provided and how the challenges identified by the participants guided the development of the position paper. The literature review included searches on the Walden University library site. The databases examined included ERIC, SAGE Research Complete, and Academic Search Complete. Search keywords included *adult learner, position papers, white papers, work education programs, success factors, mentoring,* and *military learner.*

The Position Paper Project Genre

One of the most crucial tasks for researchers is selecting the best way to articulate findings from the study and the recommended solutions in a way that will positively impact the intended audience. There are several genre options available for the researcher to report findings and advocate a position to stakeholders. According to McDavitt et al. (2016), researchers can report using an executive summary, two-way-dialog, a formal

presentation, or a video. When selecting from the variety of genres, the most important factors the researcher must consider is how well the reporting method addresses the problem, presents recommended solutions, and applies the solutions to the recipients (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The position paper was selected as the most appropriate genre for presenting the research findings and possible solutions to the research base. The position paper presents a compelling perspective based on research to provide uncommon insights to a problem and solutions to solve it (Buday et al., 2018). Additionally, the organization routinely uses the position paper to influence Air Force leadership at all levels. The *Tongue and Quill* is the communication standard used throughout the Air Force and suggests this as the preferred method to elevate ideas for the consideration of leadership, request support for a situation or show support for an issue (Department of the Air Force, 2016). The position paper was determined to be the most appropriate genre to present this research because of the nature of the research and the established and accepted use of position papers in the Air Force.

The position paper is often referred to as a white paper. Winston Churchill is credited as the first documented government official to use the term "white paper" for an official document titled the British White Paper of 1922 (Malone & Wright, 2018). A white paper or policy recommendation or position paper is an informative report with the purpose of explaining a significant issue or situation to stakeholders with the intent of providing recommendations to solve a problem or make a decision (Neuwirth, 2015). Position papers are widely used in bureaucratic organizations (Mateeva et al., 2017) with

varied formats and subjects addressed. The position paper is used primarily by government agencies to explain a policy and present new ideas or strategies to change policy (Malone & Wright, 2018). The most effective strategy when writing for the federal government is to conduct careful analysis of the intended audience, present information in a logical way in an active voice, and use short sentences and paragraphs (Mateeva et al., 2017).

The position paper will be presented to reduce challenges enlisted airmen face in the completion of a baccalaureate degree. Specifically, a plan to create a squadron level education program at the research base is presented for the consideration of leadership. Providing support at the squadron level is a possible solution to the challenges identified in the research, thus improving the degree completion rates at the research base.

Interconnected Analysis

In the review of the literature, I found a need for organizational support, availability of resources, and open communication as pathways to the success for nontraditional learners (Holzer & Baum, 2017). The Air Force offers the enlisted military population the opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree at no cost while on active duty through several programs (Department of the Air Force, 2020); however, there is little involvement at the squadron level and no measurable outcomes regarding degree completion beyond the CCAF degree (Department of the Air Force, 2020). The research findings suggest there is a need for squadron leadership to know how to best support enlisted airmen in the completion of a baccalaureate degree. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the most substantial effects on student attrition are expected from the

environmental variables. For airmen serving in the military, the squadron or assigned unit is the primary environment that has control over their lives.

Conceptual Framework

The nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) supports the content and intent of the squadron education program position paper. Providing support at the squadron level aligns with Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model in the areas of absenteeism, hours of employment, opportunity to transfer, and outside encouragement. According to Volk et al. (2020), military students have more difficulty than their nonmilitary counterparts with completing coursework and reaching academic goals due to a lack of flexibility in work hours and short notice deployments. Many military students prefer a traditional class format but enroll in online classes because of schedules and deployments (Hembrough et al., 2018). The recommended squadron education plan would inform unit leadership on which assigned personnel are attending school or wish to attend school and provide a communication plan for the commander to provide policy and guidance for those wishing to attend college courses. If the mission allows, the commander would have the information and opportunity to provide flexibility with schedules and deployment rotations.

The nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model has psychological outcomes of utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress (Bean & Metzner, 1985) that are also addressed in the recommended squadron education plan. The internal motivation of nontraditional students is directly related to their personal and professional

life (Cordie et al., 2018). Implementing a plan that truly integrates the educational goals with the professional environment by having a noncommissioned officer in the squadron as a point of contact for resources and information could positively address the model's psychological outcomes of satisfaction and goal commitment. Additionally, the undergraduate student attrition model's (Bean & Metzner, 1985) variable of social integration is addressed with the squadron education plan. Cho (2019) found that nontraditional undergraduate students thrive when they are encouraged by coworkers and friends to reach their education goals. Positive social connections should specifically focus on achieving planned goals within a specified timeline (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2019). Having a noncommissioned officer appointed by the commander as a squadron education advisor in the unit to assist with setting goals and tracking academic progress places a positive social aspect in the work center.

The variables of academic performance in the undergraduate student attrition model includes study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that nontraditional students are more interested in academics than in being involved with the academic institution. Southwell et al. (2018) found this to be true in the case of military connected students as they were less likely than traditional students to use faculty member and academic advising services offered through the school. The lower participation in school services for military connected students was related to restrictions on their time because of work and family commitments. Southwell et al. (2018), Volk et al. (2020), and Hayden et al. (2017) cited military culture as a barrier to participation for military connected

students beyond classroom involvement. Many of the available education benefits can be confusing; enlisted Airmen should receive effective counseling regarding how to best use their benefits (Gonzalez et al., 2015). The squadron education plan recommended in the project establishes a team approach that includes the commander, squadron education advisor, and the Base Education Office. This approach provides current information regarding Air Force education programs and benefits directly to the squadron level. The plan recommends each enlisted member meet with the squadron education advisor to discuss education goals and progress, schedule individual sessions with an education counselor, and discuss any challenges the airman is facing. Additionally, if specific courses are needed but are not offered, these needs can be communicated from the unit to the Base Education Office for assistance.

The implementation of a Squadron Education Program recommended in the position paper would provide direct support for enlisted airmen in their work environment. The persistence of nontraditional adult learners is related to personal, financial, social, and institutional factors (Baldwin, 2017; NAAA, 2017). Having the squadron commander involved in the education of assigned personnel potentially reduces institutional challenges and stress while strengthening satisfaction and goal commitment.

Project Relationship to Theory and Research

The challenges identified by enlisted airmen at the research base and a recommended approach to address these challenges is presented in the squadron education plan. Providing a path to expand the growth of employees has become a part of many large organizations. This includes offering professional development opportunities,

providing courses on systems and technology, and offering tuition programs to attend

college (Masalimova et al., 2016). According to Tett (2016), companies in the United

States that offer extensive tuition assistance programs have had to address specific

challenges to encourage employees to take advantage of the education programs.

Challenges included not wanting to sacrifice time from family to go to school, poor past

academic performance, and fear of failure. The most important factor for successful

workplace education programs is meeting the educational goals of the employees

(Billington et al., 2017). This includes providing open communication regarding what the

program covers, cost to the employee, and benefits for the employee. The research

participants cited challenges associated with completing a baccalaureate degree while

serving in the military. Obligations related to: military duties, deployments, and family

responsibilities and a lack of knowledge about higher education are challenges identified

by the study participants in completing a baccalaureate degree. The overall need for

support from leadership is intertwined with addressing the challenges of balancing

obligations and providing education information to airmen. These challenges are

explained in the position paper with a recommendation to implement a squadron level

education program to address them.

Having an understanding of higher education processes and military education

benefits emerged in the research as a challenge for degree completion. A lack of

understanding of applicability of degrees to civilian employment was cited by research

participants as a specific issue. Several of the airmen that were interviewed said they

were working toward degrees that they would not be able to use after they leave the

military. They enrolled in academic programs without adequate understanding of how specific degrees relate to career options outside of the military. Education is an important employment factor for transitioning military members and should be completed prior to leaving military service (Buzzetta et al., 2017; Lacity et al., 2016). When adults can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspective, their motivation increases (Tett, 2016).

The squadron education program places importance on education and career counseling with a focus on the entire military life cycle, including the eventual transition of each military member to the civilian sector. This is a paradigm shift from how military leadership considers development of enlisted personnel. A mission-first focus is critical to maintaining a combat ready military; however, military students often struggle with a balance of personal goals with mission needs and fail to complete education goals while serving (Volk et al., 2020). The military culture is more accepting of change when presented and supported by leadership (Hayden et al., 2017). By having squadron leadership involved with the education of enlisted members, helping airmen find a balance with personal goals and mission requirements, the organization would send a message of importance for attaining an education while serving in the military.

First generation college students typically struggle with managing their time and studying efficiently (Holzer & Baum, 2017). Because many enlisted military members are the first in their family to attend college (Levitan, 2017), these skills may be lacking. The participants cited a lack of academic preparation as a specific factor that negatively impacted the ability to reach academic goals. The majority of the participants found

themselves working to complete their degree late in their career in order to prepare for transition to the civilian workforce. Participants suggested having someone they worked with who was involved with their goal and provided support would help keep them motivated to get back in school when they have to take a break from classes due to mission demands. The recommended squadron education program addresses these issues by establishing personal connections with the squadron education advisor who would refer airmen for specific academic and career counseling as appropriate. Additionally, as coworkers become more aware of the programs available, a network of peers would emerge as a support mechanism. As a result of involvement and support at the squadron level, enlisted personnel should find increased motivation to set education goals and work toward them (Aljohani, 2016).

Another challenge for degree completion that emerged from the study was balancing school with military duty requirements, deployments, and family obligations. Approximately half of all military learners are married, 47% have children, and about 13% are divorced or separated (Cate & Davis, 2016). Nontraditional students generally possess greater coping skills than their traditional counterparts based on their life and military experiences (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Gewirtz et al., 2018); however, the theme of family obligation as a challenge to degree completion emerged from the data. Airmen with regular schedules, few family obligations, and airmen with positive support were able to move toward their degree completion goals faster than single parents and those with families who do not encourage and support education. Many colleges and universities address the support veteran students need with academic and personal

challenges by providing an advisor on campus dedicated solely for veteran students (Kirchner, 2015).

The squadron education program would provide a similar support system for those serving on active duty. Air Force bases have an Airman and Family Readiness Center that provides multiple services such as: deployment assistance, counseling, and training seminars for personal and work life balance, and the Air Force Aid Society (Department of the Air Force, 2018). Although these programs do not specifically address education issues, these services could be presented through the squadron education program as referral sources for those having challenges balancing family obligations with mission requirements and education endeavors. Military bases have strong ties to the local community and often partner to share resources (Neill-Harris et al., 2016). Merchur-Karp and Klempin (2016) found a positive relationship with military student achievement and civilian communities that share programs to support the local military. The majority of partnerships focus on transitioning military personnel (Neill-Harris et al., 2016); however, many of the services address challenges identified by the research participants. The recommended program would help connect existing, separate services for airmen who need assistance with family obligations while working toward degree completion.

Project Description

Using the results of the study, I developed a position paper outlining a policy recommendation as my project. The goals of the position paper project are to implement a squadron education program at the research AFB to support enlisted airmen with degree

completion (Appendix A). The presentation of the project will take place in 2021 and implementation will depend upon approval of military leadership.

Design of the Project

I used the position paper as a strategy to present a policy recommendation to the research base to implement a squadron level education program to support enlisted personnel regarding challenges in completing a degree. The project provides background information about the degree completion rates and the purpose of the research. The research findings are presented and recommendations for a squadron education plan are explained.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The resources for implementation of the squadron education plan are in place at the research base; however, this plan offers a different avenue for providing an understanding of, and access to, the resources coupled with communication at the tactical level of the organization, the squadron. The Base Education Office has trained education and occupational counselors, a testing center for CLEP and DANTES testing, and contracted colleges to provide courses needed at the tuition assistance rate. The Airman and Family Readiness Center offers family communication seminars, family counseling, financial counseling, and a transition program for those projected to leave the military. The base has a childcare center, youth center, and family daycare providers to care for children at a reduced cost. These services exist as separate functions and are not presented as a comprehensive approach to support; the squadron education program will

connect these services at the work location of enlisted airmen with the support of the squadron commander.

Potential Barriers

Change is difficult for many organizations and often results in barriers. It is important to identify potential barriers that pose a challenge to the approval and implementation of the squadron education program that is recommended in the project (Appendix A). The first barrier may be a lack of support from squadron leadership. If commanders do not find value in the education of enlisted personnel or do not want to invest time to implement a program at their level, the outcomes may not be realized. The second barrier might be a lack of motivation to earn a degree. If enlisted members are not interested in putting forth the effort to earn a degree, the problem of low degree completion will most likely remain an issue.

Potential Solutions to Barriers

This project offers a solution to help reduce anticipated barriers to the success of the squadron level education program. The project would initially be presented to an audience above the rank of the squadron commanders. By gaining buy in at the group commander or base commander level, the squadron commanders would likely support the recommendations. Gaining the interest of enlisted personnel would be gained by each commander owning responsibility for a program within their squadron and encouraging each member under their command to look at education as an opportunity to personally and professionally develop.

Implementation and Timetable

   I created a project timeline for presenting and implementing the plan. Table 4

provides a map outlining the squadron level education plan and implementation timeline.

Table 4

Unit Level Education Program—Tentative Implementation Timeline

Month	Action
Month 1	Present position paper and slides to leadership (Mission Support Group Commander, Education Services Officer) -Request approval to present position paper to the base commander. -Obtain approval of the plan, outcomes, and evaluation method.
Month 2	Present plan to squadron commanders -Set suspense for appointment of squadron education advisors. -Develop SharePoint for the Education Office to post updated education benefit resources and information -Establish shared calendar for scheduling counseling sessions at Education Office -Gather baseline data via surveys
Month 3	Schedule meeting with Education Office and squadron education advisors -Explain goals and expectations -Provide access to SharePoint -Provide tracking template for degree completion and progress
Month 4-6	Squadron commanders and squadron education advisors meet with unit personnel and establish baseline information: -Number assigned -Degree completion by level -Benefits being used to fund education -Degree progress -Interest in degree completion -No interest in education at this time -Base Education Center sends Education Support Evaluation to random sampling of assigned enlisted personnel
Month 7-11	Monitor and support progress
Month 12	Evaluation

Roles and Responsibilities

I will take on the role of presenting the project to leadership at the research base. My responsibilities will include scheduling the presentation with leadership, distribution of information, soliciting support and including ideas for improvement throughout the process. After I receive approval, I will work with squadron commanders, the Base Education Office, squadron education advisors and other agencies to present the program and ensure understanding.

Squadron commanders will own the program at the unit and appoint a noncommissioned officer as the squadron education advisor. The commander is responsible for setting and enforcing standards regarding off duty education. Each squadron may have different policies based upon the mission.

Squadron education advisors will meet with all assigned enlisted personnel and track basic information regarding education goals and progress. The squadron education advisor will be a point of contact for each squadron member and provide information regarding education and support programs available. The Base Education Office will share information with squadron education advisors, counsel enlisted airmen, and provide meaningful outreach.

<div align="center">

Project Evaluation Plan

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Promoting an understanding of the results, offering strategies grounded in the literature and results, and reducing the challenges enlisted airmen face in degree completion are the goals of the position paper project. An evaluation plan needs to be flexible and allow for changes over time. I created an education support evaluation (Table

5) that will be used to provide baseline data regarding the perceptions of support received by enlisted airmen. This baseline requires minimum time to establish and can be easily compared to future feedback using the same instruments. This will be compared to the evaluation plan (Table 6) that takes baseline information from the units regarding how many airmen are involved in education and their progress and baseline information from enlisted airmen regarding their perceptions of support (Table 5). The results offer an insight to leadership regarding effectiveness of the program and feedback from the airmen regarding any additional support they need to be successful.

Table 5

Education Support Evaluation

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. (Provide a numerical response of your agreement to each statement where: 1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=slightly agree 4=agree 5=strongly agree)
I have the full support from squadron leadership to complete the degree of my choice.
I have had personal counseling regarding education benefits, the process for taking classes, and how to establish a plan for school and degree selection.
I have time and resources to take college classes if I want to.
I have a plan to complete a college degree before I separate from the Air Force.
I am not interested in completing a degree.

Table 6

Project Evaluation Plan

Objective	Responsible	Timeline	Instrument
Establish baseline of perceived support	Base Education Office	Month 2	Education Support Survey
Establish baseline of participation, progress, and degree completion	Squadron Education Advisors	Month 6	Tracking spreadsheet
Improvement in perceived support	Base Education Office	Month 12	Education Support Survey
Improvement in participation, progress, and degree completion	Squadron Education Advisors	Month 12	Tracking spreadsheet

Overall Evaluation Goals

In Months 4-6, squadron commanders and squadron education advisors will establish baseline information from enlisted airmen regarding: total number assigned, degree completion by level, benefits being used by airmen to fund education, degree progress, number of personnel who have an interest in degree completion, and number of airmen with no interest in education. During the same time frame, the Base Education Office will send the Education Support valuation (Table 5) to randomly selected enlisted personnel. The information is coded by squadron only; all surveys will be anonymous. This process will be repeated in Month 12, the information will be compared and analyzed.

The goals of this evaluation are to (a) reduce the challenges enlisted airmen face in working toward degree completion, (b) improve progress toward degree completion, (c) improve support of enlisted airmen working toward degree completion.

Key Stakeholders

This project was developed to assist the key stakeholders who provide support to enlisted personnel and reduce the challenges they encounter while pursuing a baccalaureate degree. The base commander and squadron commanders will be an integral part of this program.

Base Commander

The base commander will be the overall owner of the process with command authority over all personnel assigned to the installation. The base commander would give the authority to implement the project and has the strategic oversight for the best interest of the airmen he commands. The base commander will provide experience and insight to any aspects that require revision.

Squadron Commanders

Squadron commanders will own the program at the unit. The commander is responsible for setting and enforcing standards regarding off duty education. Each squadron may have different challenges with implementation based upon the mission. Additionally, the squadron commander will appoint a noncommissioned officer as the squadron education advisor. Depending on the size and mission requirements, multiple squadron education advisors may be needed.

The Base Education Office

The Base Education Office is responsible for military and civilian education and training on the installation. They are responsible for managing tuition assistance, providing outreach, and counseling military personnel regarding education benefits. They will share information with the base and squadron commanders.

Project Implications

The challenges identified by enlisted airmen at the research base and a recommended approach to address these challenges are presented in the squadron education plan. The overall purpose is to support enlisted airmen with degree completion.

Considering the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving in the military, the implications of the project reach beyond the enlisted personnel affected personally. Due to federal budget reductions and sporadic use of the military tuition assistance benefit, the Air Force reduced the annual cap on tuition assistance from $4,500 (Department of the Air Force, 2020) to $3,750 beginning in October 2020 (Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, 2020). Providing support and reducing challenges in pursuing education will allow timely degree completion despite reduced benefits.

The project has the potential to promote positive social change for airmen who continue to serve and for those who separate from active duty. Having a baccalaureate degree encourages the further pursuit of education and lifelong learning. Airmen who complete degrees prior to leaving the military will have better employment opportunities after they leave the military (Routon, 2014). The results of this study and subsequent

project help to fill a gap in the literature on the experiences of active duty military personnel in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees to increase the understanding of the difficulty these airmen face in completing their degrees. The study's findings paint a picture of how active duty military students view themselves in the world of education.

At the local level, this project will support and encourage multiple services and agencies working together to support the military learner, bringing an understanding of the needs of military learners. This project could lead to further positive social change by assisting local military leadership in the development of outreach programs to assist airmen in their pursuit of higher education.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Project Strengths

This project was developed from the direct perspectives of enlisted military

students who have experienced challenges in completing a baccalaureate degree. These

challenges include balancing obligations with school attendance and a lack of knowledge

about education programs and benefits. Considering the unique needs of the military

learner and the organizational culture of the military, this project aligns with acceptable

communication norms and utilizes existing programs in an innovative way. According to

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student retention, environmental

variables are more important than academic variables to the persistence of nontraditional

students. Improving the environmental factors such as family responsibilities, hours of

employment, outside encouragement, and finances may improve persistence and degree

completion.

Project Limitations

The study was limited by the support services available and the varied level of

emphasis put forth by leadership. The nature of the military culture may have prohibited

enlisted personnel from providing honest feedback on evaluation surveys. Military

culture places a higher value on allegiance to command and mission accomplishment

than to personal goals or desires (Arminio et al., 2015). Additionally, this project does not

address the challenges faced by enlisted airmen with post-deployment psychological

issues. Additionally, several details regarding past overall degree completion are difficult

to quantify because the Air Force does not release official data regarding the number of earned credit hours, course completions, course withdrawals, course failures, or graduation success rates. The only official education data are included in the Air Force demographic publication and this is limited to overall degree completion (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Alternative Approaches to the Problem

During this study, the focus was on the challenges perceived by enlisted military personnel in the completion of a baccalaureate degree. There are other approaches to this problem that a researcher could explore. One such alternative is the perceptions of faculty members serving enlisted military members. Faculty members could be surveyed to offer insight on how to best deliver curriculum to this population. Another possible approach would be to see if there is a connection to past academic performance or background to degree completion. A questionnaire could be used instead of interviews to gather data regarding academic progress and these background factors. The Base Education Office could provide specific data regarding course withdrawals and failures to examine if certain Air Force career fields have more challenges than others with academic performance.

Alternative Definitions of the Problem

Considering the findings of this research, there are alternate ways the problem could be defined. Through an exploration of the findings using Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student retention as a conceptual framework there are

alternate ways to view this problem. Alternative definitions to this problem could be (a) military students require support to reach academic goals, (b) nonacademic issues enlisted military students encounter, and (c) leadership approaches to encourage participation in volunteer education programs in the military. These alternative definitions would require a different strategy but would have a similar impact on the enlisted military learner and add to the research published on the topic of active duty military students.

Alternative Solutions to the Local Problem

Military students encounter multiple challenges when working toward the completion of a baccalaureate degree. The challenges identified in the research and addressed in this project could be addressed in other ways. Military leadership could require an assessment of skills associated with taking college classes coupled with a class to teach the basics of the college process and how to select a degree program. Another possible solution would be to require enlisted personnel to take a time management class prior to taking a college course. Military leadership could also offer incentives toward promotion for completion of degrees or require a specific level of academic completion to assume ranks that allow supervision of other enlisted personnel.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

Through the process of this study, I remained focused on the importance of the research and contributing to the body of knowledge regarding military students and the unique challenges they face in completing a degree. Throughout the process, I gained

knowledge about not only the topic of my research but also the importance of the process of reviewing the literature, gathering data, and understanding the connection of the various aspect of research itself.

Scholarship involves acquiring the ability to analyze theory and data. I have learned how to search for scholarly literature. Initially, I had a great deal of difficulty finding sources that applied to the problem; however, I learned how to expand search criteria and read literature that connected different aspects of the problem. Saturation of literature was reached through unlikely sources and allowed the process of synthesizing and examining the information. I underestimated the difficulty in organizing the information not only with literature but also with the data that were collected.

The coding process took much longer than expected as I decided to transcribe the interviews and hand code the data. This helped me to become intimately familiar with the data and made the decision of project genre an easy task as it was an excellent fit to present the findings.

Project Development

Developing a project is difficult and requires planning, organization, and an understanding of the importance of social change. The literature review is an important aspect of project development as it provides meaning to the findings in a way that can be translated into a goal of the project. Analyzing the information from scholarly articles for the literature review provided a deeper understanding of the themes that emerged from the interviews and supported the genre selection for the project.

A position paper outlining recommendations to create a squadron level education program was the most suitable design for the project in this study. The plan specifically addresses the findings of the research and aligns with the conceptual theory that framed the study. The findings and recommendations are presented in a way that reaches and impacts the intended audience.

Leadership and Change

The military defines leadership as the art of influencing people to accomplish the mission; however, it also includes being responsible for those who are led. As a veteran of over 20 years of military service, I thought my leadership development was long over. This process has made me look at myself through a completely different lens. Through the process of research and revisions, I have learned the importance of patience and humility. I have realized that I am still developing as a leader and am an instrument of social change. Through this process, I have learned that my example and actions can influence others to also place the needs of others above self and continue the journey toward positive social change.

Analysis of Self as a Scholar

The biggest challenge I faced in this process was a lack of confidence in myself. I am a first-generation college student and struggle with depression. Although I have always worked hard to produce the best possible product, I often feel short of adequate. I have worked to learn the processes of the doctoral study and to critically read as much information as possible related to the process and the problem addressed. I have learned

the value of asking for help, and I have learned that it is healthy to take breaks but very difficult to get motivated after taking one.

I am a stronger person now than I was when I began this journey 7 years ago. I have learned through this process that I never want to stop learning and pushing to greater levels of scholarship. My work as a researcher was isolated with online instruction and an electronic library. The process was especially difficult and required extensive reading and revisions to put forth the best product. My project is directed to people I can personally relate to, airmen struggling to earn a degree while serving in the military. There is a special quality in people who are willing to give their lives to protect the freedom of strangers and this project will hopefully have a positive impact on those people. Through research and scholarship, I have learned so much about the research process and also about myself.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

In this study, I interviewed active duty military personnel who were working toward a baccalaureate degree. The participants provided personal perspectives on the challenges they faced while working to earn a degree while serving in the military. Based on the findings, I developed a position paper recommending a squadron level program for education. The project is significant because it allows unit leadership to provide an avenue for communication and counseling in a supporting way. This would provide a personal connection for the students and can lead to improved motivation, reduced stress, and stronger commitment to the military organization.

Although the project was designed to address the challenges enlisted personnel face, junior officers would also see benefit as they would receive resources to work toward graduate degree completion. The project engages a team approach to utilizing available services under a comprehensive plan. Because so many key personnel would be involved in assisting the education endeavors of the base, there would be buy-in at multiple organizational levels.

Ultimately, the research is important because it can help improve degree completion for people serving in the military. This has an ongoing impact as they transition out of military service and into the civilian workforce. Employers understand the significance of a college degree but sometimes have difficulty translating military skills alone (Carter et al., 2017). Having a degree improves the employment outlook for those transitioning out of military service.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Although the research focused on one specific Air Force base, the strategies developed in the study can translate to other military bases. Military leadership will determine if and when the recommended program is implemented. Military leadership is encouraged to develop their people personally and professionally (Hayden et al., 2017); this project will provide an avenue for this development. The model of nontraditional student retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985) is still applicable to this area of research and could be used for further research.

Future research might expand the scope of this study. Researching several bases or multiple branches of the military could provide a different result. The results of this

study provide the challenges identified for enlisted personnel in one subset of the military as an organization. The local research is an excellent starting point for further research as it provides a project targeted to improve a process that impacts multiple facets of the military.

Conclusion

I selected the topic of enlisted military learners and their challenges with degree completion because of personal and professional interest to understand the problem on a deeper level. Through the process of this basic qualitative study, I detected a gap in practice regarding degree completion and the extensive programs that enable an enlisted airman to complete a degree at no cost. The results of this study suggest the challenges the airmen perceive as hindering their progress toward degree completion can be addressed by implementing a squadron level program. The proposed program utilizes existing services and creates a meaningful resource at the level of the airman. Publishing this study will provide other bases the foundation of a program that addresses similar challenges. This project validates the need to advocate for the development of military personnel.

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Appendix A: The Project

Challenges for Active-Duty Military Personnel in Completing Undergraduate

Degrees

According to the most recent data released to the public by the Air Force Personnel Center, as of 1 January 2020, 8.9% of those currently serving as enlisted personnel on active duty in the Air Force worldwide have completed a baccalaureate degree. Seymour Johnson Air Force Base has an even lower degree completion rate of 7.7% for all enlisted personnel assigned, including those who entered the military with a degree. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of enlisted airmen in regard to the challenges faced and strategies used to complete a baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty in the Air Force.

The results and strategies are presented in this paper to provide information to military leaders to assist enlisted members stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in completing their bachelor's degree prior to exiting the military. The research conducted during this study revealed military members who complete their degree prior to transitioning to the private sector have better employment opportunities and earning potential than those who do not complete a baccalaureate degree. The findings presented in this paper are designed to foster an understanding between military leaders and those serving within the enlisted ranks regarding the challenges enlisted members face while working toward a degree. The recommendations are provided with the intent of assisting military leadership to promote success for enlisted personnel in completion of a baccalaureate degree.

This paper presents strategies developed to assist military leaders support enlisted personnel assigned to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base complete their undergraduate degree while serving on active duty and also provides suggestions for enlisted airmen pursuing an education while supporting the military mission. Strategies presented in this paper may be combined with programs already in place to assist military members pursue an education.

The first section includes three challenges to degree completion that emerged as themes from interviews with enlisted study participants. Strategies to address each challenge are presented. The second section includes a proposal for commanders at the unit level to implement a plan for supporting education of enlisted personnel in their squadron. The third section provides suggestions to improve degree completion for enlisted personnel by building upon programs in place and expanding education outreach to inform enlisted personnel throughout the military lifecycle.

Section 1

According to the participants in the study, completion of a baccalaureate degree prior to leaving the military is an important goal; however, there are challenges, factors considered important for success, and support from leadership that should be considered if airmen are to achieve this goal while serving on active duty. Interview data revealed six themes: obligations, lack of knowledge about higher education, support systems, personal goals driving motivation, positive support from leadership, and ways leadership can better support enlisted personnel toward degree completion.

The first theme that emerged from the study was obligations. Specific factors that made this a significant challenge include restrictive military duties and schedules, deployments, and family obligations. Participants reported difficulty in balancing obligations with the pursuit of a degree and all of the participants experienced extended timeframes where they could not attend college. The participants used different strategies for addressing these challenges; however, assistance and guidance from leadership with balancing specific situations was suggested.

The second theme to emerge from the study was a general lack of knowledge about higher education. The majority of the airmen who participated in the study enlisted in the Air Force for an education benefit; however, none of them initially had a clear understanding of what was involved in reaching this goal. They listed the following as specific factors that increased difficulty maintaining motivation to persist toward higher education goals: limited experience with academics, lack of understanding of applicability of degrees to civilian employment, and poor time management skills. Several of these airmen were working toward degrees that they would not be able to use after they leave the military; they did not have adequate career counseling prior to starting a degree but were too far into the program to change. These factors contributed to difficulty in performing well in classes and continuing with a consistent plan to complete a degree.

The third theme that emerged was support systems. The airmen who participated in the study found support from family, friends, and base agencies to be critical in

working toward a degree. All of the participants experienced difficulty pursuing education goals without this support.

Personal goals was the fourth theme to emerge from the interview data. There were specific factors that improved personal motivation such as needing to finish a degree before separation, education benefits transferred to dependents, preparedness for employment after leaving the military, the personal satisfaction of completing a degree, and career advancement in the military.

Positive support from leadership was the fifth theme that surfaced from the data. Participants who had leadership that provided time to work toward education goals found this support as a critical element of being able to find balance between individual challenges and attending school. Some of the participants experienced a lack of support from leadership regarding time but said they would find great benefit if they could have flexibility with duty time and school. To make gains on their goals, participants who struggled with difficult work schedules or too many duties volunteered for deployment or a remote assignment and changed academic plans to programs that are 100% online. Those participants who chose a remote assignment or a deployment in order to make gains toward degree completion reported having more time to dedicate to education in those environments than while at their home station.

The sixth theme was suggested support from leadership to improve their ability to complete a degree. Having flexibility in work schedules and having an education program at the squadron level were suggested. Leadership allowing flexible schedules for airmen to attend school and receive academic counseling was the first suggestion. The

participants also suggested leadership at the unit level have more of a role in enlisted education and make degree completion a priority by having a squadron education program. Participants expressed value in the idea of their leadership understanding the challenges they face and encouraging airmen to go to school. The participants also reported that some direct supervisors encourage education and understand the process, but others do not have an education and do not value degree completion as a goal for their subordinates. The direct supervisor is frequently not equipped or interested in assisting airmen reach education goals; however, commanders could take an active role by making education a priority. The suggested program should provide education resources and promote them at the unit level.

Supporting the education goals of enlisted military members demonstrates that the Air Force values the development of airmen personally and professionally. Enlisted airmen who desire to pursue higher education should be identified upon arrival to and throughout their time stationed at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. Leadership at all levels should support those airmen who have the goal of completing their baccalaureate degree while serving on active duty.

<div align="center">Section 2</div>

<div align="center">**Plan to Provide Unit Level Support of Enlisted Education**</div>

Squadron commanders have many responsibilities; in most cases it would not be feasible for a commander to personally devote the time they would like to the educational goals of their enlisted personnel. It is recommended a noncommissioned officer be appointed to represent the commander as an education advisor. This squadron education

advisor should be someone who has completed a bachelor's degree and is dedicated to supporting enlisted airmen who want to pursue an education. The squadron education advisors will work with the Base Education Office to provide the best possible guidance to enlisted members and inform the commander of program status. Additional recommendations for squadron commanders to support enlisted education include:

1. Provide guidance for military members pursuing an education. Include restrictions regarding taking classes during upgrade training or other circumstances. Communicate support of completing education goals and encourage airmen to research programs and request assistance if needed.

2. Identify military personnel who are currently working toward a degree by level: CCAF, bachelors, masters. Are they actively working toward degree completion? How many classes do they need to complete their degree?

3. Identify military personnel who desire to work toward a degree. Ensure these members have an appointment with an education counselor at the Base Education Office.

4. Meet with new personnel regarding education goals.

5. Take an active role in promoting education programs and hosting an education briefing annually at a minimum. Respond to the needs of assigned personnel by providing resources that work for the unique mission of the squadron i.e., unit level classes and lunchtime classes.

6. Identify single parent and dual military personnel who are working toward degree completion. Provide a network for peer support to connect individuals

with similar challenges. Provide information on existing resources for

childcare and family counseling.

By providing support and promoting degree completion, more enlisted personnel

will be encouraged to complete education goals and complete a bachelor's degree prior to

leaving the military.

Section 3

Recommendations to Improve Degree Completion for Enlisted Personnel

Improving the degree completion rate at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base

requires a team approach. Commanders and their education advisors need to work with

the Base Education Office in order to ensure airmen are using their education benefits to

complete a degree the airmen truly desire. It is recommended squadron education

advisors from each unit receive a briefing from the Base Education Office regarding

available programs and be provided a contact list for education counselors. The Base

Education Office should maintain education resources in a shared electronic environment

and notify squadron education advisors of updates and changes.

It is recommended CCAF degree progress be tracked at the unit level and all

options to complete the CCAF be explained either by a squadron education advisor or an

education counselor. Options such as taking traditional seated or online classes and the

differences between them as well as tests for college credit such as CLEP and DANTES

should also be explained. Additionally, all airmen working toward or who have

completed a CCAF degree should be provided information regarding how their CCAF

credits can transfer to a bachelor's degree.

It is recommended those airmen wishing to pursue a bachelor's degree be offered a session with an education counselor to discuss degree and school options prior to establishing an education goal in the Air Force Virtual Education Center (AFVEC). Bachelor's degree progress should also be tracked at the unit level.

It is recommended the Base Education Office partner with squadrons to provide meaningful outreach. The Base Education Office should work with contract schools to provide flexible options for classes at the unit level upon request. The education office would notify squadrons of available options for specific classes and minimum enrollments required to schedule these classes. Additionally, units should receive an education briefing at least annually explaining the programs available regarding education: testing, commissioning programs, counseling services, occupational programs to assist with educational goals, grants and scholarships, and VA education programs.

Education outreach should be expanded to key points in the enlisted military life cycle. In addition to involvement at the unit level, there are key points when an in-depth education briefing should be received. When a new airman arrives at Seymour Johnson AFB, they should receive information regarding how to start working toward their CCAF and or bachelor's degree. The First Term Airmen Center is an excellent opportunity to brief basic education benefits and provide additional information. This should include an overview of individual CCAF progress reports, so each new arrival can see if they have received credit from technical training and can get instructions on how to order a transcript if they earned college credit prior to entering the Air Force. Another potential point to provide an education briefing or counseling is after completion of upgrade

training at the journeyman level. This would provide an opportunity to review CCAF and bachelor's degree status or establish an education goal. The third opportunity to provide a briefing would be upon completion of Airman Leadership School. Completion of this first level of Professional Military Education satisfies a requirement toward CCAF completion, leaving general education courses as the final step toward completion of this degree. Each of these briefings should not only include CCAF progress but also how the CCAF is a foundation for completion of a bachelor's degree of their choice.

It is recommended single parents and dual military personnel be provided information on existing resources for childcare and family counseling. Open, honest communication should be encouraged to allow the squadron to assist with challenges related to balancing family obligation with the mission and educational goals.

Squadron commanders, noncommissioned officers, and the Base Education Office play an important role in the success of military personnel completing a bachelor's degree. The support and encouragement of noncommissioned officers will often determine how successful an airman will be in their education pursuits. Military leaders should be willing to work with enlisted personnel who desire to work toward a degree and understand the benefits available to them. With the support and encouragement of their leadership, enlisted airmen can continue to accomplish the mission and complete a bachelor's degree. This will provide for a better educated enlisted force who is prepared for employment when they decide to transition out of military service.

Appendix B: Permission to use Figure 1

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Appendix C: Protecting Human Research Participants Training Certificate

Certificate of Completion

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

Date of completion: 08/19/2015

Certification Number: 1813942

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Persistence is defined as a student's ability and willingness to remain engaged in a program of study until graduation.

1. What decisions or choices do you feel you have had to make in order to persist toward completing your bachelor's degree?

2. What strategies do you feel are important in order to persist in completing a bachelor's degree?

3. How have you managed situations that impeded your progress toward degree completion?

4. What has slowed your progress or made getting a degree difficult?

5. Can you tell me about a recent challenge you had to overcome in your degree program?

6. What do you perceive as factors that contribute to your academic success?

7. What role has leadership played in your pursuit of a bachelor's degree?

8. How do feel leadership could (further) support your academic progress?