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THEY SELF-IGNITED:

ADULT STUDENT JOURNEYS TO AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE

WHILE ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY OR MILITARY SPOUSE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

LINDSAY POHL BIBUS
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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Chester and Elizabeth Pohl, for everything they gave me along the way; and to my children, Alex, Daniel, and Katie, and my son-in-law Piero, the lights of my life. I dedicate it as well to all my dear friends whose loving and constant support made this work possible. This work is also dedicated to all adult students, civilian and military, who hold tight to their academic dreams.

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Abstract

This qualitative study was undertaken in order to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of adult students and how they made meaning of their journey. To that end, through in-depth interviews with twenty participants, the study inquired into the journeys to an associate's degree of adult students who were also active duty military service members, their spouses, or civilians employed by the military. The study explored their reasons for not enrolling in college or for dropping out after high school, reasons for military enlistment, the personal and environmental factors that precipitated their enrollment later on, their experiences with college as adults, factors that fostered their persistence, and ways the experience of college may have changed them. The theoretical framework of the study was drawn from theories of adult learning and development.

The findings revealed that decisions to enlist in military service were closely intertwined with later decisions to enroll in college; nine major themes were identified that addressed the research questions. These included lack of interest in, or opportunity to attend college after high school, choosing military enlistment as an alternative way to improve themselves, growth and maturity in a demanding environment, the eventual realization that college was a salient goal, coping with careers, family and college, and expanding views of their own academic capabilities and place in the world. Additionally, the research findings revealed that the military environment, despite the constraints it placed on the participants' lives, may have positively influenced both their personal and socioeconomic development as well as their ability to pursue their degree.

Chapter One

Introduction

Community colleges are a unique American invention with "a foundational belief in self-development and an unquenchable mission to extend education beyond the privileged classes" (Hagedorn, 2006, p.10). Community colleges are valued for their capacity not only to offer students entryways to greater economic benefits (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Grubb, 1999; Kane & Rouse, 1999), but also to democratize education by maintaining opportunity and providing the basis for "a career, a new life, or a new perspective" (Mullin, 2010, p. 3). Their open access is seen to offer working adult, nontraditional students the opportunity to enter the mainstream of American society. Nontraditional college students have been defined as those who are over 25 and who most likely exhibits several of the following characteristics: work at least part time, have children, come to college academically underprepared, are first generation college students, come from a lower socioeconomic background, and belong to a racial or ethnic minority (Choy, 2002). Further, these nontraditional students, who make up the majority of all community college students, may take many years to finish their degree, after starting, stopping, changing institutions, working, starting a family, and eventually returning to complete a degree. And they remain essentially invisible in the literature and largely ignored in higher education policy (Adelman, 2005; Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Ewell, Schild & Paulson, 2003).

Background of the Problem

Community colleges play a significant role in the American higher educational system, enrolling in the fall of 2006, over 6.2 million students, more than 35% of all postsecondary students (Provosnik & Planty, 2008 p. 2). Enrollment at public 4-year colleges and universities roughly doubled from 1965 to 1999, while enrollment at public community colleges increased more than twice as much (Kasper, 2003). Community colleges provide access to higher education for those who otherwise would not be able to attend college, opening for their students the doors to the economic and health benefits higher education can provide (Belfield & Bailey, 2011; McMahon, 2009; Porter 2002). Community college student populations are highly diverse, tend to work while they go to college, and are older than traditional age students. Community colleges also offer access to those whose academic skills, including level of English language proficiency would not qualify them for enrollment in four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Grubb, 1999), those who need to improve their job skills, or those who need time to decide what they want to do after high school (Grubb, 1999).

The U.S. Military, like the community college, might be considered an "engine of social progress" (Kime & Anderson, 2000, p. 464). Those who are economically and socially disadvantaged have often viewed military service as a way to a better and more productive life that would not have been possible otherwise (Elder, Wang, Spence, Adkins & Brown, 2010; Moskos & Butler, 1996). Wang, Elder and Spence (2012) found that young people enlisted not only to better themselves, for career and financial security and other benefits such as health care,

but also for the opportunities for college. Similarly, Kleykamp (2006) found that economically disadvantaged youth with college aspirations were more likely to choose military service over going to work. All branches of the U.S. Military provide access to, and funding for, higher education for service members. This is done through several different programs. The G.I. Bill is certainly the best known program. Established in 1947, the G.I. Bill has provided more thirty million veterans with education benefits, enabling them to attend college after they leave active duty military service. Less well known are the programs sponsored by the Department of Defense to provide higher education to service members who are still in the military. Through the Servicemembers Opportunity College (SOC), a civilian-military partnership of higher education associations, institutes of higher education; and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, active duty service members are provided funding for and access to higher education (Kime & Anderson; 2000; Polson, 2010). In 2011, 325,324 service members enrolled in postsecondary courses and 44,692 college degrees were awarded to active duty service members (Baker, 2012, p. 3). Military spouses also participate in higher education while their spouses are active duty. In 2010, approximately 136,000 spouses were enrolled in the military's Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA) career education benefits program (Baron, 2010).

Reasons Adults, Civilian and Military, Enroll in College

There is general consensus in the literature that higher education provides substantial benefits to those who manage to complete a degree. These include work stability, financial security, and gaining new skills (Kasworm, 2008). With the

demise of American blue collar workers who, with a high school education, could make a comfortable living, and the rise of the global knowledge economy, the knowledge and skills provided by higher education are now considered by the general public as a necessary ticket to middle class earnings and status (Carnevale, Strohl & Smith, 2009; Scrivener, 2008). The U.S Census Bureau reports that the average annual earning of adults with an associate's degree was nearly $38.000, which is almost 30% higher than the average earned by those with only a high school diploma (Scrivener, 2008, p. 7). Their investment in higher education may have additional, non-economic, more private returns as well (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). These benefits may include better personal and family health, general economic well-being (for instance improved consumer habits), the benefits of less reliance on the welfare system, and less involvement in crime (McMahon, 2009; Porter, 2002). However, most adults enroll in higher education for practical reasons. According to research on reasons adult students enroll in higher education, most of them return for pragmatic reasons such as advancing their career or having the satisfaction of holding a degree (Sewall, 1986).

Motivations to participate in college classes while in the military are also generally pragmatic, mirroring the reasons adult students enroll in community colleges in the civilian world (Sticha et al., 2003). Some college is expected of military service members who wish to be eligible for promotion and remain in military service. Further, enlisted soldiers can also take courses in order to provide a foundation for a future career in the civilian world (Brauchle, 1998; Sticha et al., 2003). The average length of service in the military is less than ten years, meaning

that the majority of service members are either not promoted and leave military service, or decide on their own to enter the civilian workforce after the usual minimum years of service, generally four years. Even that small percentage that remains in the military until retirement age, after 20 years of service, will be in the civilian workforce by the time they are 40 years old, with a pension that will not adequately support themselves and a family (Segal & Segal, 2004). Thus active duty service members have extrinsic reasons to be working on a degree, either to be able to remain in the Army or to begin a career when they leave the service.

Characteristics of Students in Community Colleges

The majority of community college students are adult, part-time students who work, are likely to be of an ethnic or racial minority, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These students are labeled nontraditional; this name refers to the fact that their demographics are different from the 18-22 year old full time student, the traditional college student. Horn and Carroll (1996) defined a nontraditional student as an individual who, at a minimum, possesses one of the following characteristics: a) has delayed enrollment following high school graduation, b) is a part-time student for at least a part of the academic year, c) works 35 hours or more per week while enrolled, d) is considered financially independent under financial aid qualification guidelines, and e) is a de facto single parent (p. 5). Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) refer to "the richly diverse but nontraditional students who attend them" and describe community colleges as consisting of "disproportionate numbers of non-resident, part-time, older, non-white, and working class students" (p. 155). Later research has added first-generation student status,

having parents neither of whom attended college (Engle & Tinto; 2008; Kim, 2002). If we look at community college enrollments with traditional versus nontraditional student status in mind, we see that the majority of students, nearly three quarters in 1999-2000, were nontraditional in at least one of the categories listed above (Choy, 2002).Until now, demographics of active duty military community college students have not been captured in the same statistical data base as civilian students (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges,* 2012). However it is possible to speculate about the demographics of active duty service members, who are pursuing a community college degree, by turning to data on military service members in general. The demographics of military service members exhibit nontraditional characteristics similar to those of students in community colleges. They are all nontraditional in that they all work full time. In addition, 50% of all military service members are over the age of 24. Approximately 20% are African American, and nearly 10% are of Hispanic ethnicity (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010, p. 186). Military service members marry young, are slightly more likely than civilian peers to be married, and nearly three-quarters of married service personnel have dependent children (Kelty et al., 2010, p. 190). They have generally attended multiple colleges as they move from one duty station to another (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012). Of those service members who earned a degree in 2009, over 63% earned an associate's degree (Snead & Baridon, 2010, p. 79). This phenomenon would appear related to the data from 2005 that indicateds that only about 7% of recruits enter the military with some college (Kane, 2006, p. 6).

Some more demographic information about community college students who are also military service members can be inferred from data compiled by the college from which most of the students in this study were earning their associate's degree. In 2010-2011 seventy-five percent of the college's students were military service members (Snead & Baridon, 2010, p. 87). Of the student population, 42.1 % were white, 25.8 % were African-American, 16.6 % were of Hispanic origin, and the average age of all graduating students was 34 (*Annual Report to the Community*, 2012).

Nontraditional Status and Degree Completion

Nontraditional status is, according to a large body of research, correlated with a higher degree of non-persistence to a degree (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kim, 2002; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006; Radford & Berkner, 2010). Research on this phenomenon has focused on minority status (Nora & Cabrera, 1993; Rendon, 1994), socioeconomic status (Engle & Tinto, 2008), academic under-preparedness (Adelman, 1999; Attewell, 2008; Hoachlander, Sikora & Horn, 2003). There is a general consensus in the research that rates of completion differ substantially by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Adelman, 1999; Berkner, He & Cataldi, 2002; Kuh et al., 2008).

Adult status has also been long viewed as a hindrance to academic persistence. As the statistics show, community colleges are an important entry point to postsecondary education for adults with no previous college education. Adult students—defined here as students 25 or older—make up 53% of all community

college students (Horn, Nevill & Griffith, 2006, p. 3). They are seen to be attending community college sometimes inadequately prepared, both academically and psychologically, for college-level learning (Howell, 2001). While enrolled, older students are more likely than younger students to be working, married, caring for their children, and less engaged with traditional-age classmates (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996). They are also more likely to attend part time, to enroll in an occupational rather than an academic program, and to seek an occupational certificate rather than pursue an associate's degree or transfer to a four year institution (Bailey et al., 2003). These factors associated with older students apparently negatively affect their enrollment patterns, enrollment intensity, and the probability of completing a degree (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Choy, 2002).

Military students and their spouses face additional barriers to pursuing an education. For one, military personnel and their families frequently relocate to new duty stations, a factor that would make attending college a more difficult activity than for civilian counterparts. The typical Army soldier spends much of his or her stay in a deployed duty station. Maneuvers, extra duties or shifts, the "mission" as the Army calls it, are the norm, and take priority over going to class. Access to the internet or to class materials may be hard to arrange. Many lower ranking soldiers live in barracks, where the peace and quiet needed to study may not be available. These barriers to participation are reflected in the slow progress of military service members to a degree. Data from some of the largest providers of higher education to the military indicate that military students, on average, take less than three courses per year (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012).

Adult Students, Civilian and Military, Who Persist to a Degree

That adult students generally take few courses in a year, and are perceived as less likely to complete college successfully does not mean that these adult students, both civilian and military, do not eventually persist, in their own way, on their own time. One might speculate that there are several reasons why these nontraditional students who take courses less than half time and transfer from one institution to another are perceived as less likely to complete a degree. Typically statistics on completion are captured for a single institution (Adelman, 2006; Ewell, Schild & Paulsen, 2003; Tinto, 1989). However, more than sixty percent of American students attend two or more colleges on their way to a degree (Adelman, 2005; Headden, 2009). This is particularly true for military service members and their families who, because of frequent moves take college courses from a wide variety of schools, either those on the base where they are stationed or online. By the time they graduate, they will probably attend at least five different institutions (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, p. 7). Further, when statistics are captured from the students' point of view, for individual students as they proceed from one institution to another, these are generally limited to a maximum of six years for community college students (Bailey, Leinbach & Jenkins, 2006; Ronco, 1996). The few studies that have followed individual students for an even longer period of time have found some evidence that completion rates do indeed increase when students are followed for longer periods of time (Adelman, 2006: Attewell & Lavin, 2007).

Concerning completion rates for active duty service members, their progress has not been captured in meaningful statistics that would explain their patterns of taking college courses and eventually graduating (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012), although at present approximately 45,000 college degrees are awarded annually to military service members and their spouses (*DoD Voluntary Education Fact Sheet*, 2011). Similarly there is a lack of research in the literature that would lead to an understanding of the characteristics of persistence patterns, or pathways, of all nontraditional students (Adelman, 2005, Marti, 2007). In this regard, Ewell, Schild and Paulson observe:

> Today's college student is more likely than ever to transfer from one institution, enroll in a second or third school, and simultaneously take distance-learning courses from yet another provider. Reading a college transcript today is like examining a quilt. It is made up of pieces and patches obtained from several sources. Though the patterns of progress toward postsecondary goal achievement have changed dramatically, our ability to comprehend these patterns has not kept pace. For the most part, we continue to look at institutions as the unit of analysis, when we should be focused on the individual–the mobile and technologically agile student (2003, p. i).

Adult students, then, tend to work on a college degree on their own time, and fit college around their lives. This pattern would seem to contradict a recent trend at the government level to tie funding for community colleges to timely completion rates of their largely nontraditional student body (Bradley, 2012; Gonzalez, 2012; Mullin, 2012), as well as a very recent call to accountability for those colleges

serving military service members (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012). Similarly, the trend toward accountability for graduation rates has been accompanied, in the literature, with a new emphasis on finding ways for community colleges to realistically foster persistence for those students who are actively trying to complete a degree. These include structured degree plans (Clayton-Scott, 2011), accessible advisory services (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006; Karp & Hughes, 2008), shorter semesters and predictable class schedules (Bailey, 2009; Clayton-Scott; 2011; Rosenbaum et al.), and work experience for college credit (Klein-Collins, 2009). These are very similar to practices that have been in place in Military Voluntary Education, ensuring that mobile service members have a realistic opportunity to complete a degree (Kime & Anderson, 2000; Polson, 2010).

Statement of Problem

Whereas the pattern of enrollment in several colleges over time may not necessarily be problematic for the student, it can be for the institutions that depend on funding. Institutions and funding agencies are currently focussing their attention on community colleges' failure to "retain" students over a limited number of years. Federal and state funding is often tied to these retention rates; the possibility that institutions are not really so inefficient, but are serving students who are going to finish their degree "on their own time" has not been explored (Attewell & Lavin, 2007). Much of the discussion of community colleges today acknowledges the fact that the concept of the traditional student and the traditional pathway to a degree no longer apply. If community colleges are to remain the democratizing institution of

higher education they are supposed to be, a better understanding of these students and their academic pathways is necessary.

Further, community colleges who serve the substantial number of active duty service members, all adult, nontraditional students, who are enrolled in their programs are now also being called to account for completion rates of these students. There has been scant mention in the literature of these students and their paths to a degree, however, or of the interaction between environmental and personal factors that influence decisions to enlist in military service, later participation in the military lifestyle, and eventual decisions to participate in higher education. In order to realistically track the academic progress of these military students, an understanding of these journeys is necessary.

Finally, there is an urgent discussion today on ways to foster nontraditional student success in community colleges. The military's Voluntary Education Program has several programs and practices in place designed to provide structure and support for those military students who are pursuing a degree; and there is little mention in the literature on higher education of these practices, although they may offer insights that would benefit community colleges everywhere.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to enlarge our understanding of the educational experiences of adult learners in the community college, who followed a pattern of "stepping in and stepping out" in the course of completion of an associate's degree. These students, moreover, were situated within the institution of active duty military service. The study focused on the rhythms and patterns of their

educational processes, and the internal and external factors that served both as barriers and means to overcome these barriers and distractions that they encountered. Of particular interest were the working adult students who attend community college while active duty military or a military spouse, the interaction of personal and environmental influences on reasons to enlist in the military, factors that are characteristic of the military environment, and the influence these might have on participation in higher education and eventual persistence to a degree. Further, the study was expected to contribute to the current urgent discussion, in the literature, on community college student persistence and on those community college practices that may enhance students' persistence to a timely degree. The Department of Defense Voluntary Education program has several programs and practices that are designed to nurture and support adult students; and an exploration of these, and their significance to the individual student, was expected to contribute to an understanding of effective ways to realistically improve adult students' ability to complete a degree

Research Questions

1. What factors contributed to their discontinuing their studies after their initial enrollment?
2. What were their reasons for enlistment in the military?
3. In what ways do these students perceive they have changed since they discontinued their studies after their initial enrollment?

4. In what ways do these students perceive that their lives and personal circumstances have changed since they discontinued their studies after their initial enrollment?
5. What were the reasons for their re-enrollment in college after having dropped out?
6. What factors, personal or environmental, kept them in college this time?
7. In what ways has the experience of being a college student and obtaining a degree affected them or their lives?
8. What are their future career and academic/personal plans on completion of their associate's degree?
9. How do they perceive that the experience of attending college while on active duty has helped or hindered their progress?

Definitions

Academic Pathways: A term used to describe progress through higher education, and illustrates the wide variety of attendance patterns that students follow.

Academic Persistence: Continuance of a student to a degree; for the purpose of this study, to an associate's degree from a community college.

Academic Success: For the purpose of this study, the completion of an associate's degree.

Active Duty: Full-time duty in the active military service of the United States under the Department of Defense.

Adult Students: Students for whom their primary roles are related to work and family, rather than the student role.

Associate of General Studies Degree: Associate degree program which provides a broad general education for a student preparing to transfer to a four-year institution ("Associate of General Studies: Degree Overview").

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) testing: Exams for college credit, recommended for credit by the American Council on Education. These include CLEP and DSST testing ("DANTES Examinations Programs").

Deployed sites: Military Bases in areas where troops are positioned in readiness for combat. For the purpose of this study, military bases in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Education Center: Centers at military installations worldwide that provide comprehensive educational services such as academic counseling, computer laboratories, testing services and classroom space for the resident colleges and universities (Kime & Anderson, 2000).

Enlisted soldier: To become an enlisted soldier in the U.S. Army, you must be:

A U.S. citizen or permanent resident alien

17-35 years old

Healthy and in good physical condition

In good moral standing

Have a High School Diploma or equivalent

Some Army jobs may have additional qualifications.

An Enlisted Soldier's rank can range from Private to Sergeant Major of the Army ("About the Army").

Enlistment: To enter the Armed Forces

GoArmyEd : The virtual gateway for all eligible Active Duty, National Guard and Army Reserve Soldiers to request Tuition Assistance (TA) for classroom and distance learning. It allows soldiers to manage their education records including college classes, testing, on-duty classes and Army Education Counselor support ("Welcome to GoArmy Ed").

Identity: The growth of a sense of self that arises from participating in society, internalizing its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses, and playing different roles (Gleason, 1983).

Military spouse: Spouse of an active duty service member.

Motivation: The process that initiates, guides and maintains goal-oriented behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Extrinsic Motivation: Refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic Motivation: The natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest and exploration (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts Program (MyCAA): A program sponsored by the Department of Defense to provide military spouses with funding and assistance leading to certificates and associate degrees and careers in career and technical fields ("MyCAA Fact Sheet").

Nontraditional Student: individual who, at a minimum, possesses one of the following characteristics: a) has delayed enrollment following high school graduation, b) is a part-time student for at least a part of the academic year, c) works 35 hours or more per week while enrolled, d) is considered financially independent under financial aid qualification guidelines, and e) is a de facto single parent (Horn & Caroll, 1996).

Non-commissioned officer (NCO): An enlisted service member who obtains a position of authority by promotion through the ranks of enlisted soldiers ("About the Army")

Retention: Ability of an educational institution to keep students enrolled until they complete a degree or course of study.

Self-Efficacy: People's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attend designated types of performances (Bandura, 1986).

Student Attrition: Reduction in a school's student population as a result of transfers or dropouts.

Tuition Assistance (TA): Funding provided by the Department of Defense to active duty service members, used for civilian education separate from military training (Kime & Anderson, 2000).

Voluntary Education: Off-duty civilian high school, vocational-technical, undergraduate and graduate educational opportunities provided to military personnel worldwide by the Department of Defense through the respective Services and their local education centers ("Military News on Education")

Significance of the Study

There is a growing trend, due to reduced availability of funding, to call for accountability, or timely completion rates, of all community colleges, both those that serve civilian students and those that enroll military students. However there is a small but growing body of research that indicates that the large bulk of typical retention data collected, and retention research carried out, at individual institutions and within limited time frames does not present a complete nor sufficient picture of many community college students' long-term pathways to a degree. Further, although nearly one half million active duty military service members and their spouses enroll in college courses every year, there has been scant mention of those factors, both personal and environmental, that might influence these students' long term academic pathways. Further, there is an urgent discussion, in the literature, on practices that may enhance adult students' persistence to a timely degree. The Department of Defense Voluntary Education program has several programs and practices that are designed to nurture and support adult students; and an exploration of these, and their significance to the individual student, would contribute to an understanding of effective ways realistically to improve adult students' ability to complete a degree. This study applied theories of adult development to explore the educational journeys of working adult students, who were active duty military service members, their spouses, or civilians who were working on military bases. Further, they had completed, or were near completing, an associate's degree from a community college, most of them in an occupational program.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

In July of 2009 President Obama proposed the American Graduation Initiative "to invest in community colleges and help American workers get the skills and credentials they need to succeed (*The White House: Remarks by the President,* 2009). The initiative highlighted the importance of better meeting student needs. Meeting student needs can best be done if these individuals are understood. To this end, this study explored, within the framework of adult development and learning theories, the lived experiences of these nontraditional students who make up the majority of all community college students. Chapter Two first addresses the role of community colleges within higher education and community college programs and students, both civilian and military; and then turns to a discussion of the apparently disappointing success rates of adult students attending community colleges and reasons why these may not offer an adequate portrait of nontraditional students. The remaining part of Chapter Two explores theories and models of adult participation, adult development, and adult learning in an attempt to better understand adult learning patterns and the factors that may help them succeed at formal education.

Characteristics of Community Colleges

Community colleges typically offer two types of programs leading to an associate's degree. The first is the academic program, which functions as a bridge between high school and higher education, and offers traditional college-level courses to prepare students to transfer to 4-year colleges. The instruction is generally designed to resemble academic courses at 4-year schools and to be in-

depth, theoretical, and unrelated to specific occupational applications (Levesque et al., 2008). In 2000, about 20% of all students seeking an associate's degrees were enrolled in academic programs (Hudson & Shafer, 2004, p. 1).

The second degree-granting program is the occupational program, which prepares students in a vocational field such as business, information science, and health professions. Occupational programs have always been an offering of community colleges; however it was the federal Vocational Education Act of 1963, with its generous funding allotments for occupational programs that opened the way for significant growth of these programs, and brought about a fundamental change in emphasis in community colleges from a college transfer function to an occupational function (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The great majority of community college students enroll in these occupational programs as they provide the necessary skills for those planning to join the American workforce as mid-skilled laborers (Levesque, et al., 2008). Called variously vocational training, occupational training, vocational-technical education or, more recently, workforce preparation or career technical education, (CTE) these programs prepare their students for semiskilled, skilled, technical, and paraprofessional occupations (Hudson & Shafer, 2004) In 2004, approximately 69% of students seeking associate's degrees majored in occupational fields (Bailey et al., 2003, p. ix).

Voluntary Education for Active Duty Military Service Members

Community colleges also provide both academic programs and occupational programs leading to an associate's degree to active duty military service members and their spouses throughout the US, as well as to those who are stationed in foreign

countries and in deployed zones. Just as community colleges were conceived of as a vehicle for the social mobility of wide segments of the American population, so too did the Department of Defense and Congress, with the War memorandum No 85-40-1 of 1948, set policy for payment of tuition for college courses taken by military personnel during off-duty time, with the "objective of increasing social mobility for service members and veterans, especially those who are not selected for the advanced training that the most successful in military service enjoy, as a result" (Kime & Anderson, 2000, p. 467). The Department of Defense (DoD) has also long recognized the need for continuing education (CE) for military service members and has extensive programs, under the Army Continuing Education System, to support volunteer, off-duty educational activities for military personnel and, in many cases, their spouses. The DoD Voluntary Education program is one of the largest continuing education programs in the world. The program encompasses 350 education centers worldwide and 1,400 personnel plus staff members who are under contract to the program (*DoD Vol Ed Partnership Training*, 2011). Active duty service members are granted up to $4,500 per fiscal year for higher education from institutions accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the Department of Education (*DoD MOU,* 2011). In 2012, 325,324 active duty service members enrolled in college courses (Baker, 2012). Their spouses were also able to benefit from DoD-sponsored college tuition funding, and in 2010 over 130,000 spouses used this funding source to enroll in college (Baron, 2010).

There are several reasons why the Department of Defense supports continuing education for its service members and their spouses. The military

recognizes the importance of formal education that can provide the critical thinking skills and ability to understand complex situations of the educated person (Kime & Anderson, 2000). In addition, with the establishment of the All Volunteer Force in 1973, educational benefits have been seen as an incentive for recruiting high quality personnel (Sticha et al., 2003). The opportunity to attend college is an important recruiting point for the Army, and there is an assumption that many are attracted to the military for this reason (Kolstad, 1986; Snead & Baridon, 2010; Sticha et al, 2003). Consequently educational services are available on all larger military bases worldwide, and the government provides generous tuition assistance for military service members (Kime & Anderson, 2000, Polson 2010). The Department of Defense also provides financial aid for eligible military spouses, who are pursuing education, training or credentials/licenses. These include education up to the associates' level, in an occupational as opposed to an academic field, and the funding is meant to assist military spouses to train for employment in high growth fields where highly-skilled works are in demand, no matter where the family might be stationed (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2010).

The associate's is the degree earned most frequently by active duty military service members. In the fiscal year 2009, of those military students who earned a degree, over 63% completed an associate's degree (Snead & Baridon, 2010, p. 79). Community colleges, as opposed to four-year institutions, have been seen to be a good choice for military students, on the basis that the open door policies and support services traditionally offered by community colleges may provide beginning students and those who have been out of high school for several years with the

opportunity to improve their skills and show their ability to do college work before transferring to a four-year institution (Snead & Baridon, 2010, p. 79).

The above discussion clarifies how community colleges, both in the civilian educational sector and as part of the Voluntary Education Program available to military service members, are uniquely poised to offer broad segments of the population access to a college education and the resultant increased quality of life.

The next two sections explore some widely held beliefs and assumptions, concerning persistence on the part of adult, nontraditional students once they have enrolled in college. These are based on the widely-cited statistics reported in the literature.

Short Term Statistics, Civilian and Military, on Degree Completion

It is generally accepted that adult, nontraditional students, who enroll in community colleges, show a lack of persistence toward degree completion, a finding based on persistence rates, as they are now captured, generally for single institution, and for a period of only several years. And the numbers are not very positive. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) three years after their first enrollment, about 10% of all initially enrolling students had completed their associate's degree at the original institution (Horn & Weko, 2009, p. 25). However, when statistics are extended for a longer period of time, and measure individual student persistence at any institution, the results are somewhat more positive. According to NCES, in 2009, six years after an initial enrollment in a community college 54% of all students had obtained a degree or certificate or were still enrolled somewhere. Nontraditional students were somewhat less likely than

more traditional students to have obtained a degree or be enrolled somewhere. After six years, students who continuously attended part time had much lower completion rates than those who attended full time, and those 30 years or older were much less likely to complete an associate's degree (Radford & Berkner, 2010, p. 5). Of recent high school graduates, 63% had received a degree or were still enrolled somewhere, while only 46% who had been out of high school for a while at the time of their first enrollment were still enrolled or had completed a degree or certificate somewhere. (Radford & Berkner, 2010, p. 15). Horn and Weko (2009) reflect on the reasons for the apparent lack of persistence of adult students and note, in the introduction to their study based on data from the 2004/2004 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS):

> Many students may be…hampered in making progress toward their goals in ways not captured in the BPS survey. For example, some students may be expected to contribute to their family's income and work full time to meet these obligations. Full-time employment may limit college attendance to less than half time…" (p. v).

However, the amount of state funding a community college receives, in a number of states, is based upon performance, or the institutions' retention rates and timely graduation rates (Bradley, 2012; Dougherty, Natow, Hare & Vega, 2010; Gonzalez, 2012). Further, in 2012, President O'Bama released a list of proposals that would provide more funding for those institutions that were able to graduate more students and prepare them for the workforce. This call for accountability on the part of the institutions echoed what was already a trend among policymakers

who are faced with less funding and ever increasing enrollments and the resultant practice of tying funding to outcomes, retention, transfer and graduation rates (Bradley, 2012). This is done using the Federal Graduation Rate Survey that mandates a three-year graduation rate (Dougherty, Hare, Natow, 2009). In addition, the Federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, which is the standard source for student degree attainment statistics, counts only first time, full-time, degree-seeking students (Dougherty, Hare & Natow, 2009). At most community colleges the percentage of adult students who would be counted in IPEDS, as the literature has shown, is very small.

In summary, although adult, nontraditional students make up the majority of all community colleges, and according to the statistics take longer to finish a degree than three years, enroll less than half time, and who in addition move from one institution to another, soon may be even further hindered by the fact that the institution that they want to enroll in, when they are able to, has experienced reduced funding and is possibly less able to serve them effectively.

Turning to active duty military students, and concerning their completion rates, only limited data-driven evidence on outcome measures for military students enrolled in college programs is available (Snead & Baridon, p. 84). In line with the general present concern over program accountability, President Obama signed an executive order in 2010 requiring all those institutions that receive payments for military or veteran education benefits to provide completion rate data on service members (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012). The following suggestions made by the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (2012) give some idea of the

difficulty of tracking military service members enrolled in community colleges. The proposed tracking system would target all students who have completed nine credit hours with an institution and have officially transferred to that institution at least another nine credit hours of previous work, and then follow them for another four years and record their academic progress. This relatively liberal capturing of military student progress is deemed the most suitable due to the fact that military service members find it even harder than civilian counterparts to predict when is a good time to enroll in a course, or if they will be able finish it on time, and often have to withdraw from courses for reasons that are outside their control. In addition, military students are likely to have attended more than five institutions before earning an undergraduate degree; they also tend to stop out and resume later (*Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges*, 2012). It may be, then, that even this liberal capturing of military student progress will not accurately reflect the realities of college attendance of these individuals.

Patterns of Adult Participation in Higher Education

The traditional college student enrolls in a four-year institution directly after high school, and within four to five years completes a bachelor's degree, or, in two to three years, an associate's degree. The enrollment patterns of adult students, on the other hand, tend to be less neat; adults start, stop, and start again, at a second college or even a third or fourth (Choy, 2002; Ewell, Schild, Paulson, 2003; Grubb, 2006; Reason, 2009). However, Attewell and Lavin (2007), in one of the very few longitudinal studies that followed individual students, found that of all nontraditional students who entered City University of New York in 1970-1972, 70

percent had earned a degree 30 years later (2007). Thus there is at least some concrete evidence that short-term persistence rates, even in those studies (e.g, Adelman, 1999, 2006) that follow students for eight years, do not adequately describe adult persistence to a degree.

The little research that has been done on successful adult individuals themselves has shown that they have "held tightly to the view of themselves as college students, as individuals who will accomplish their academic goals" (Kinser & Deitchman, 2007, p. 76); these authors propose a concept of "tenacity" for these students. Similarly, Adelman (2006) speaks of students who do not finish their degree in a timely manner at the same institution at which they started as "actors shaping their fate" (p. 107), and further highlights "those individuals making a series of rational choices that take advantage of opportunities offered by institutions so as both to discover true interests and reach productive ends" (p. 107). Tinto (1987) describes them as individuals who may "take extended time off from higher education; but ultimately they may judge the change as positive and not a result of failure" (pp. 132-33). Finally, Hagedorn notes:

> While a dropout could be viewed as "anyone who leaves college prior to graduation" it must be accepted that a "dropout" may eventually return and transform into a "non-dropout" any time prior to death thereby negating any earlier designations used for studies, research, or retention rates. Former dropouts may return as a full time or part-time students, to the same institution or another institution; remain in the same major or switch to another major" (2009, p. 6).

Similarly, Grubb introduces the term "swirling" to describe this phenomenon (2006, p.34). Adult student college attendance patterns may also reflect shifting curricular needs, or the need for new or additional credentials. McGivney (2004) explains adult enrollment patterns as going in several different directions, upwards, to gain additional skills or credentials, sideways, to deepen their knowledge or to learn something new, downwards, to a lower educational level in order to pursue an interest further, or zigzag, moving between higher and lower levels. Both sets of patterns illuminate the difficulty of obtaining data that reflect the reality of student persistence in the traditional sense (McInnis, Harley, Polesel & Teese, 2000).

In summary, the scant research that has addressed long term adult student persistence to a degree presents a much more nuanced picture of individuals who are pursuing, in their own way and in their own time, an individual pathway.

Factors that Influence Adult Participation and Persistence.

The discussion turns to an exploration of adult nontraditional students through the framework of theories on adult development and learning. These theories may help to explain more closely, and with more complexity, their pathways to a college degree by addressing factors that might influence adult working students to finally go back to college and then to persist through the difficult, unfamiliar world of college. In this regard, Kowalski and Cangemi (1983) synthesized research on the characteristics of persisters and non-persisters in higher education, and compiled the following list of characteristics:

Persisting students have been found be

More mature,

Flexible,

Selective in choosing their school, and

Certain about their educational goals

Persisting students were found to have a:

Greater sense of self-awareness,

More self-motivation,

Better study habits,

More self-discipline,

Greater familial support,

More financial security,

Less familial pressure,

Higher aspirations,

Greater endurance,

More interest in school, and

Greater intellectual and academic abilities.

Non-persisting student were found to suffer from

Poor motivation,

Inadequate work habits,

Uncertain goals,

General lack of interest in school, and

Immature attitudes and perceptions

Non-persisting students

Had low level status- and achievement drives,

> Lacked initiative,
>
> Had financial difficulties,
>
> Were indecisive and disorganized,
>
> Were lacking in intellectual independence,
>
> Procrastinated when faced with academic responsibilities, and
>
> Were often unable to identify with or become involved in college life and related campus activities (p. 93).

The intriguing feature of these characteristics is that, among the population of adults who delay enrollment or re-enroll at a later date, those who eventually become persisters were, at one point, non-persisters (Spanard, 1990). It would appear that these students have changed, or their life circumstances have changed, in ways that enable them eventually to persist to a degree. More adult students may well persist to a degree than is generally acknowledged in the literature. To do this they may have made a journey; they may have started out with personal characteristics or life situations that were not conducive to completing college, but somewhere along the way evolving personal qualities and environmental factors may have afforded them the desire and opportunity to go back to school and complete. These are the steps of progression that are missing in the current literature that this study will address. The following section will address several of the models of adult participation and consider how they explain adult pathways to a college degree.

Models of Participation in Formal Education

The following models consider both personal and environmental characteristics, and the interaction of the two in predicting why, and when, adults will pursue formal education. These will first be addressed with relation to higher education.Boshier (1973) found that decisions to participate in formal education resulted from an alignment between the individual and the educational environment. His Congruency Model proposed that people are either growth motivated or deficiency motivated, and growth motivated individuals, who believe they can be successful students, are less influenced by social and environmental forces and more apt to develop and pursue future goals which include college attendance. Cross' (1981) chain-of-response model explains that an individual must believe he or she is capable of succeeding in higher education, or it is very unlikely that participation will take place, no matter how much is done to eliminate situational or institutional barriers. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) noted that an adult's socioeconomic status is the result of the preparatory education and socialization he or she has undergone as a child and adolescent, and is indicative of the willingness to participate in formal education. Gorard, Rees, Fevre and Welland (2001) describe learning as educational 'trajectories' and propose that motivations to learn and participate in formal education are influenced by family background, prior education, and the time and circumstances of leaving that initial educational experience. Kwong, Mok, and Kwong (1997) examined social background factors and motivations among 425 adults in Japan, and found that family role and social position correlated with reported reasons for returning to school. A desire to change

one's life structure, to leave the neighborhood behind, motivated adult black males to return to college in a study by Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010).

In summary, adults' decisions to participate in formal education are a result of a complex interaction of social and personal factors. Socioeconomic background, individual motivation to grow, the saliency of the activity as useful to individual goals, and one's self-evaluation all are significant factors in the decision process. This chapter turns to theories of adult development and learning that may influence adults, both civilian and active duty service members, to pursue higher education.

Theories of Adult Development

The following section of the review of the literature takes a closer look, through a discussion of psychosocial theories, at what may be going on in the lives of adults, at the factors that may contribute to their longer paths to an education and eventual success,. The section addresses life structure theory, followed by transition theory and identity development theory. These imply that the adult, in interaction with the environment, experiences sequential, qualitative changes in skills and psychological structure, leading to greater maturity and complexity (Knefelkamp, Widick & Parker, 1978).

Life Structure Theory

According to a large body of research, individuals influence, and are, in turn, influenced by, the circumstances and structures of their lives. These structures change over time, as individuals pass through their life cycle. Levinson (1986) proposed that adult development proceeds through a series of stages tied closely to

chronological age. These stages or seasons may be related to age-related events such as marriage, children, work, or retirement. Levinson's theory of life structure sees the construct as mediating between the individual and their environment, with its aspects being shaped both by the self and the world. Over the period of an individual's life that person's life structure changes and is involved with distinct developmental tasks. Life structure answers the question "What is my life like now?" (1986, p. 4). Theorists who study women through the framework of life structures have argued that Levinson's model does not satisfactorily account for the psychosocial development of women (Caffarella, 1992). Sales (1978) notes the greater importance child-raising plays in women's life structures; women, more than men, take on different roles as children are born, develop, leave home and become parents themselves. Alexander (1980) found that the transition period at age 30 was important in that subjects felt they gained greater control over their lives. Feinstein, Anderson, Hammond, Jamieson, and Woodley (2007) found that enrolling adult students who had been caregivers were more likely than others to report finding a new job and meeting employer requirements as motivations for enrolling. In summary, research on life structure and women's development has suggested that women experience their lives "as they are now" somewhat differently from men. In general, relations with partners or children seem to influence women's development to a greater extent than men's. Women, at least those in the earlier studies, or women from socioeconomic backgrounds where childbearing occurs in their twenties, may tend to make changes to their life structure when child-raising is no longer their main focus.

Life structure of adult working students.

Levinson's life structure model may help to explain why so many men, and women, in community college did not complete a college education right after high school. Numerous studies have found returning adult students citing work and family responsibilities as the main reasons they enrolled and did not complete (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 1993; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Sewall (1986) found that over two thirds of all students cited work and family obligations or lack of interest as their reasons for not completing "on time," that is, within a certain limited number of consecutive semesters immediately after high school. Whereas the above cited studies usually considered family and work responsibilities as barriers to completion, Sewall (1986) suggests these adults had been getting on with their developmental tasks as they saw them, with their "situation in life at a given time" (Cross, 1980, p. 106). Kerka (1995) points out that "adults usually have pragmatic, focused reasons for participating and will leave whenever they feel their goals have been met or if they feel the program will not satisfy their goals" (p. 2). In a similar vein, Hanniford and Sagaria (1994) found, among eventual degree completers, that older students, once their life circumstances permit, show a high degree of persistence until finished: "life circumstances may actually interfere less with persistence than with the initial decision to return to college" (p. 21). And Attewell and Lavin (2007), reflecting on their study on long term persisters, note "They stop for a while or drop down to part-time status to earn enough money to pay for next semester's tuition, or for rent,

or to have a child, or to accept a promising job opportunity…a college opportunity is something that has to be fit into the rest of life" (p. 1).

Life structure models offer several valuable insights into adult participation in formal higher education. The decision to return to higher education is the result not only of present circumstances, "what my life is like right now," but also of the sum of past experiences. The family may play a greater role in the life structure for women than for men during the child raising years. Further, a re-evaluation of life structure, and a desire to change it, may result in a decision to enroll. And working college students must fit college into their life structure, unlike younger students. Work and family duties, seen this way, are not barriers, but facts of life that must be worked around if the student is to succeed.

Life Transitions

The concept of life events or transitions is the focus of a second framework through which to view adult students. Life transitions refer to the engaging in developmental tasks such as getting married, having children, enrolling in class, and the possibility for growth that they offer. The transition may be the result of personal, interpersonal, or community changes, but in any event must be seen as such by the individual (Schlossberg, 1995).

Transitions can be anticipated or unanticipated. Anticipated transitions are those that most people expect to happen in their lifetimes, like getting married, finishing school, going to work, and having children. Neugarten (1976) stresses the importance of the patterns that society imposes that are based on age norms. There is a prescriptive timetable for life's events, such as marriage and having children

and men and women are well aware of them and whether they themselves are on time. The potential for development from a life event is closely tied to the timing of the event. If an event happens at roughly the same time that society expects it to happen, individuals will find many sources of support and reinforcement. However, if the event is unanticipated, for instance losing a seemingly secure job or getting a divorce, the event may be particularly stressful; however, it may also hold the potential for stimulating more learning and growth than anticipated events (Merriam, 2005). These events, that in and of themselves may be neutral, are viewed differently by people, and can be seen as positive or negative, as a gain or as a loss.

Another type of transition Schlossberg calls a sleeper transition. This is something that occurs gradually, possibly unnoticed for a while, but results in a significant change. Examples might be a marriage that is slowly coming apart, an individual becoming more independent or competent or self-confident. In all transitions, however, "our roles, relationships, and routines have all been altered" (1986, p. 23). Gould explains "Certain key events—buying a first house, a first car, experiencing a first baby, the first loss of a parent, first physical injury or first clear sign of aging—force us to see ourselves more as creators of our lives and less as living out the lives we thought were our destiny" (1987, p. 13).

There is a large body of research that has found a correlation between individual phases of transition and a readiness to learn (Aslanian, 1988; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Brookfield, 1992; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988, 1995; Sewall, 1986). Aslanian and Brickell point out that "to

know an adult's life schedule is to know an adult's learning schedule" (1980. pp. 60-61). Havighurst notes that developmental tasks and changing social roles are motivators for learning, in that they create a teachable moment (1972). Kasworm (2008) explains that adults often enroll in college during a life crisis such as divorce or separation, because of work concerns or because of a personal need such as a career with greater financial security. In her interviews with faculty members, Rendon (1994) views the adult decision to go back to school as often a conscious decision to escape occupational dead-ends, despair and hopelessness. Jinkens (2009) found a general understanding that there was a significant event [life changing event] that changed how the students approached education. It does not have to be an epiphany, it could be a gradual change, but a catalyst occurs that causes the change. Sargent and Schlossberg state that adults in general are "motivated to learn and to change by their need to belong, matter, control, master, renew and take stock" (1988, p. 58). Scanlon (2008) calls the process of adults' deciding to go back to school self-authoring, a conscious consideration of their lives and circumstances, with an ensuing realization that they need to make a change. Walters (2000) reflects that adults look at their lives, at various points, and realize their lives need a restructuring; something has become redundant, their skills, their frame of reference, their role or relationships. However, adult readiness to change depends, according to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), on the presence of four factors, situation, support, self, and strategies. Situation refers to the transition the individual is experiencing, whether it is perceived as positive or negative, on time or off schedule, and if it came at a time when the individual has time and energy to devote

to learning from it. Support refers to those who can help the individual, family, friends, co-workers, and whether they will support or hinder the individual in their efforts to learn. Self refers to the individual's strengths, weakness, previous experience with transitions and his or her basic optimism and ability to deal with ambiguity. Strategies are the person's strengths and coping skills. Is the individual able to change the situation or change his or her perception of the situation, for instance not blaming the self (1988).

In summary, life transitions can offer powerful reasons for adult decisions to learn, if they are perceived as such, if adults feel the need to change their lives because of these transitions, and if personal dispositions, support and life circumstances permit.

Identity Development Theory

Identity development theory, and the interplay of adult identity and participation in higher education, is the next lens through which adult students will be addressed. The concept of identity development, first proposed by Erikson (1963, 1978) explained sequential psychological development as a model with eight stages leading to the development of the following qualities: trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. Individuals address a series of crises, brought about by developmental tasks, to arrive at more or less healthy resolutions (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). In Erikson's model the appearance of each stage is tied to chronological age, and the outcome is focused on the development of the ego, and a solid sense of identity–"who I really am." Vaillant (1977) found, however, that the order may be influenced by critical life events, and

that adults, faced with new crises, may have to reevaluate their sense of identity. Erikson's (1963) model of identity development was concerned primarily with childhood and adolescence but his concept of identity, which is shaped by how one organizes experiences within the environment, has been adapted to explain adult identity gdevelopment in many ways. Marcia (1966) viewed identity development as being the result of disequilibrium, a psychological state where one's traditional way of making sense of the world no longer matches one's perceptions of present self in the environment.

Erikson's model of identity development has been criticized for its lack of attention to women's psychosocial development (Caffarella, 1992), with a general agreement that women's resolutions of Erikson's stages, and especially of the issue of intimacy and identity, differ profoundly from men's, and that women define themselves much more through their relationships, and that their development is based to a greater extent than men's on affiliation and attachment rather than on separateness and autonomy (Caffarella, 1992; Franz & White; 1985; Gilligan, 1982). Josselson (1988), in her interviews of adult women in their thirties, found that, for these women, relational connections were essential. They may be as capable or successful as their male counterparts in the world of work, but career success does not compensate for unfulfilled relationship needs.

College and adult identity development.

Recent researchers have noted that motivations for returning to college among adults are tied to students' identities–who they perceive themselves to be, and who they hope to become (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Widick, Parker and

Knefelkamp (1978) propose that college, for adults, presents challenges and demands that may force them to reexamine their sense of who they are, and make necessary a revisiting of the issues of trust, autonomy, industry and initiative; the result is a new sense of who they are. In her study on adult students and identity development, Kasworm (2008) likewise suggests that adults bring a rich adult identity with them to college, where they also face great challenges to this identity, and actively begin to renegotiate their sense of who they are, in relation to other students and their other adult worlds. Studies have also shown that the college experience can profoundly change one's sense of identity, especially for women (Stone, 2008). Cohen's study of underprivileged women attending an elite private university found a trajectory, over time, from a belief in the necessity of simply giving back what one believes one is supposed to say, to a comfort with relying on one's own opinion of what is right. The women, interviewed after three years of college, were seen as having transformed their identities of themselves from having "an assumption of inferiority, the impulse to blend in…to a desire and ability to boldly re-invent themselves, to feely and confidently choose an alternative identity" (1998, p. 369). Bowl (2003) described an enhanced sense of self as one of the perceived gains of higher education amongst a cohort of working class and ethnic minority adults. Walters (2000) found that although students' original motivation for returning to school was a desire for qualification, that schooling brought unanticipated results of increased self-confidence, a new sense of personal identity, a widening of individual horizons. Men, on the other hand, although they may report significant personal growth, couch this growth more often in terms that reflect

increasing already existing skills or growth in status or respect from others (Stone, 2008).

In summary, since Erikson's work psychologists have been aware that adults' sense of who they are is constantly developing. One way to development, as Marcia (1966) pointed out, is through some disequilibrium in our way of making sense of ourselves and the world; this causes individuals to reassess who they are and may lead to changes in the individual's self definition or perception of self. Studies on women have found that relational issues play a larger role in women's identity development than in men's, and crises in personal relationships may more often result in women's reassessing their view of who they are. These studies would imply that the act of enrolling in college may be an attempt to change one's identity for some individuals. Others, especially those first generation adults, may feel they have to reject their former identity, and feel a sense of betrayal of their families and friends. Male minority students may find that a college student identity does not easily fit with their traditional view of themselves, and may struggle with their sense of what a man should be as they take on the role of college student. Thus the college experience can have a profound effect on how one sees oneself. An enlarged world, full of new, expanded identities may present itself. This seems to be especially true for women, who experience a more transformative change than men, who, on the other hand, may experience significant growth of a more pragmatic kind. The following sections will examine two psychosocial constructs that have been found to affect adult student decisions to participate, and ability to persist once they are enrolled, those of self-efficacy and motivation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Another body of research that addresses the cognitive and affective and their relationship in individual learning and development, centers on the study of self-efficacy, or a student's positive self-evaluation, widely considered to have a significant impact on student persistence (Chartrand, 1990). Bandura's (1993) social cognitive theory posits that human achievement depends on three factors: individual behaviors, personal factors and environmental conditions. Individuals hold self-efficacy beliefs, or beliefs in their ability to influence outcomes. These beliefs allow them to control their thoughts, feelings, and actions. They also affect cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes. These self-efficacy beliefs influence whether individuals see themselves as capable or not, whether they are motivated to persist in the face of obstacles, and also affects the choices they make at crucial times. Subsequently, knowledge, skill, and prior accomplishments are often unreliable predictors of future attainments, because the beliefs individuals hold about their own capabilities and about the outcomes of their efforts influence their behavior. Further, how individuals interpret the results of their efforts influences their environments and their self-beliefs.

Researchers have pointed out that those with high levels of self-efficacy in relationship to a certain form of learning are more likely to participate in it (Cross, 1981; Hammond & Feinstein, 2005; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Similarly, Cross (1981) makes the observation that individuals tend to cite lack of time or money as reasons for not participating, rather than admit that they feel they

are too old, or lack ability, or just are not interested, in other words, lack the perception of themselves as successful students.

Thus it would seem that a certain amount of self-efficacy with regard to formal learning would be a prerequisite to signing up for a college course or program. However, adult students who are re-enrolling after dropping out originally, or never started college in the first place might be supposed to lack strong academic self-efficacy beliefs. Perhaps prior life experiences such as raising children or being successful at a job have created a general sense of self-efficacy that allows these adults to perceive that they might be successful in college as well. Although this researcher found little evidence in the literature whether self-efficacy can be said to generalize beyond a specific domain, some empirical research has indicated that there is a generalized sense of efficacy (Smith, 1989).

Bandura (1986) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs among students affected grade achievement and persistence by increasing student motivation to attempt and master difficult tasks and a willingness to use acquired knowledge and skills to complete these tasks. Within the classroom, judgments of personal self-efficacy are the result of performance, for instance when adult students see they are making progress (Wlodkowski, 2008). These attainments can be enhanced by accurate feedback and the assignment of tasks that offer opportunities to succeed, but that likewise challenge students, and by tasks that focus on development of competence, expertise, and skill (Brookfield, 1990). Similarly, Schunk (1996) theorizes that at the start of an activity, students hold differing beliefs about their capabilities to acquire knowledge, perform skills, and master the material. Initial self-efficacy is

dependent on aptitude (e.g., abilities and attitudes) and prior experience. While they are working on tasks, personal factors such as goal setting and information processing, along with situational factors (e.g. rewards and teacher feedback), affect students. Motivation is enhanced when students perceive they are making progress in learning. In turn, as students work on tasks and become more skillful, they maintain a sense of self-efficacy for performing well. In addition, a higher sense of efficacy leads students to perform those activities that they believe will result in learning. As students work on tasks, they derive information about how well they are learning. The perception that they are mastering material enhances efficacy and motivation.

There is a considerable body of research that suggests that higher self-efficacy beliefs correlate highly with academic achievement among high school students (Bong, 2004) and with academic achievement and persistence among traditional age students in four year colleges (Chartrand, 1990; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Mattern & Shaw, 2010). Studies on Hispanic students at four year colleges found that the sense of self-efficacy correlated significantly with student achievement. Moreover, beliefs about self-efficacy, combined with perceived family support, were found to have the most significant correlation with achievement (Solberg & Viliarreal, 2007; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Chartrand (1990) surveyed non-traditional undergraduate and graduate students at a four-year university and found that commitment to the student role and evaluation of oneself as a good student could be related to persistence. However, there is limited recent research on self-efficacy among other nontraditional students in community colleges, where

problems with under-preparedness and high attrition are more often the case (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005). In one of the few studies of nontraditional students at an urban commuter college Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade (2005) found that, among minority and immigrant students, self-efficacy was the single strongest predictor of GPA, although self-efficacy did not have a significant effect on persistence to the second year. These students, although possessing the nontraditional characteristics of race/ethnicity, were nevertheless traditional age.

In summary, there is some indication in the literature that academic self-efficacy beliefs can affect adult student persistence. This belief can be enhanced when adults are presented with tasks and an environment that challenge and support them and allow them the opportunity to master new skills. The following section will address motivation theory. Adult students, as has been noted, are generally motivated by very practical goals such as a career or job skills. It would follow then that motivation might be a factor in adult students' persistence.

Motivation Theory

Motivation has long been shown to be a significant mediating variable in general student persistence (Allen, 1999; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pintrich, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 1981; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Kasworm, Polson and Fischback (2002) surveyed the literature on adult students and persistence based on descriptive research in the 1990's, and from this research compiled a list of the most common characteristics of adult student persisters and nonpersisters. Of the six dispositional or psychosocial qualities identified as characteristic of adult student persisters, four related directly to motivation:

1. Clear set of goals and declaration of a concentration

2. Strong study habits and higher aspirations

3. Strong self-discipline and determination

4. The view that course work develops skills in self-directedness.

Tinto (1975) proposed one of the earliest models of student persistence in an effort to explain 4-year college students' decisions to withdraw or continue in college. He explains that students bring with them goal commitments, which have been influenced by other student characteristics such as family background, personal attributes and pre-college educational experiences. He noted "…it is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out from college" (p. 96). Cross (1981) points out the importance of the individual's belief that participation in education and training will lead to some goals considered important. Factors such as life transitions, amount of information available, and opportunities and barriers further influence whether or not an individual ends up participating in adult education and training. The capability of the barriers to deter participation in adult education and training, according to the model, depends, again, on how strong an interest the individual has in adult education and training.

In his study of factors affecting traditional age and older students and motivational factors, Grubb (1999) points out that those students who do not have clear goals and a fundamental understanding of why college is important are less likely to persist in the face of difficulties and frustrations. Similarly, Cox (2009) found that adult community college students were willing to work hard at material

they did not enjoy because they saw that it was important for their career aspirations. And Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) reported the results of a study that concluded, "educational aspirations are more likely to influence contact with faculty than contact with faculty is to influence educational aspirations" (p. 395). Bean and Metzner (1987) found that student intent was second only to GPA in importance among adult college students as a predictor of persistence. In their review of the relevant literature on reasons for student attrition at community colleges, Bean and Metzner (1985) found strong evidence that educational aspirations, or goal commitments, were positively related to persistence. A model of motivation to participate in formal education that was developed by Smart and Pascarella (1987) is of particular interest here in that they surveyed entering adult students in 1971 and, nine years later, surveyed those who had stopped out at that university and were preparing to re-enroll. The authors observe that the intention of the men and women to return to college was strongly influenced by their career attainments and experiences, and their reason to return grew out of the motivation to obtain the training and credentialing they needed to pursue careers that offered more intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. These students, the authors observe, were highly motivated to fulfill their career goals, and that the ability of the college's programs and policies to recognize and support these goals influenced their decisions to reenter college. Further, they noted that men more often reported intrinsic goals, for instance greater responsibility or fulfillment in their jobs, whereas women reported extrinsic goals as their reasons for re-enrolling such as higher pay or promotions. Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey & Jenkins speculate that once older adults have "dusted off their math skills"

(2007, p. 232) their motivation and maturity help them successfully succeed in college as well as their younger counterparts, although they conclude that this positive association needs further study. Similarly Justice and Dornan (2001) found that older students are more likely to attend college for intrinsic reasons such as self-esteem or cognitive interest, whereas younger students report more external motivations, such as expectations of others. Ryan and Deci explain that intrinsic motivation is the result of the inherent human growth tendency. Intrinsic motivation is self-authored or endorsed, and entails pursuing an activity because it is valued by the individual, because it represents an abiding interest, or because it fulfills a sense of personal commitment to excel. Those pursuing an activity for one of these reasons experience more "interest, excitement and confidence" (2007, p. 67) than those who engage in an activity for extrinsic, or externally imposed reasons. Concerning intrinsic motivation, Bye and Pushkar (2007) found that nontraditional adult students showed more intrinsic motivation and that this increased motivation, in turn, produced increased positive emotion, more so than for traditional students.

In a rare study that explored military service members' motivations to enroll in education, Bauchle (1998) found that younger students reported extrinsic motivations such as the need to get promoted or preparation for a job after leaving the service. However, for those who began the educational journey, "the process itself became the motivator" (p. 23) and that a movement from external to internal motivation frequently occurred among older students.

In conclusion, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations affect student willingness to participate in formal education. Strong motivation, especially intrinsic

motivation, may be able to compensate for frustrations or difficulties that arise during college participation. Younger, traditional students tend to cite external motivators when explaining their reasons for attending college. Older students may, on the other hand, have begun college for external reasons such as a better job or better pay. However, as they continue their academic journey, their motivation may be more strongly affected by their enjoyment of the learning process itself.

As the focus of the study is adult students in occupational programs at community college, the following section will address some of the findings of the scant research that has focused specifically on psychosocial factors related to occupational students, and their reasons for participation in formal education.

Occupational Students in the Literature

Although occupational students make up the majority of community college students, they themselves have been the focus of only a few researchers, notable among them W.N. Grubb. Grubb (1999) points out that the occupational program at a community college is often a "stepchild of a stepchild" (p. 2) in the discourse on higher education. And this despite the fact that, as Grubb (1999) notes, they play a very important role for many individuals, providing: "…experimenters looking for a life path, welfare recipients, dislocated workers or others in job training…a way into the mainstream of economic life" (p. 1).

The older occupational students Grubb interviewed found themselves for a variety of reasons needing a new line of work:

> …career jobs' with real prospects for higher wages, greater stability, and some advancement. Some had not taken high school seriously, or had

> attended underperforming high schools, or had come from family backgrounds where college attendance was unknown or financially impossible, and so had found themselves drifting around a series of unskilled jobs for a number of years (1996, p. 70).

Bailey et al. (2003) make another of the scant observations about occupational students that can be found in the literature, and point out that although enrolling in an occupational program (as opposed to an academic program) would seem to mean that students had a goal in mind (a certain skill or job) they nevertheless, according to their lower completion rates, are less motivated than their counterparts in academic programs.

According to some research, students may view occupational programs in college as a means to a credential instead of actually learning the material that the credentials or degrees are supposed to represent and avoid academic courses, even though these offer the opportunity to gain the analytic and conceptual abilities that they will actually need in later life (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Grubb, 2006). Threeton (2007) suggests that Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Environments may add to an understanding of the certain personality characteristics of those students who choose occupational courses, and their lack of interest in these academic courses. Holland's Theory is based on the following four principles:

> 1) In our culture, most persons can be categorized as one of six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. 2) There are six kinds of environments: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. 3) People search for environments that will

> let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles. 4) A person's behavior is determined by an interaction between his personality and the characteristics of his environment (Holland, 1994, pp. 2-4).

Qualitative research focusing on academic outcomes for successful occupational students is very rare; one study, however, found that students in a basic vocational program who were encouraged and respected by their instructors and who shared work and responsibility for outcomes in hands-on projects with their instructors showed an increase in perceptions of their own capabilities, and in their ability to succeed. The majority of these students decided to continue their education beyond the occupational program they had originally enrolled in, due in large part to "a regained sense of confidence in learning and the possibility of assuming an active position in their life trajectories" (Bonica & Sappa, 2010, p. 377). Similarly, Hirschy, Bremer and Castellano (2011) point out that an older student taking individual courses [in occupational programs] who has been away from the classroom for decades may gain confidence in his or her ability to complete college-level work and then decide to apply to a certificate or degree program.

In conclusion, the scant research that exists has observed that students in occupational programs seem to choose their college casually, to have career objectives rather than academic interests, and shun academic courses if possible. Threeton's use of Holland's taxonomy may provide some insight into occupational student characteristics; they may be realistic types who like practical, hands-on

activities. However, Grubb (1996, 1999) observed that these students seem to choose their college because of convenience, and to choose occupational programs when they are unsure of their college ability. This observation would concur with statistics on occupational students and their relative under-preparedness for college work (e.g. Bailey et al., 2003). It may be that some occupational students choose these hands-on programs not just because they are interested in gaining the practical skills and credentials involved, but because they need first to learn more about college, and about themselves as students, and business or child care or automotive courses are the kinds of courses they feel they might be successful in. There is also some indication in the very recent studies addressed above, that, for some students, success in occupational programs can lead to increased perceptions of personal abilities, and subsequent rising academic aspirations.

The final section of this review will take a closer look at the literature on what factors, environmental and institutional, may help adult students persist, and will conclude with a discussion of how military voluntary education has addressed some of these factors.

Empirical Research on Institutional Factors that Encourage Persistence

Once adult students' lives and personal development make re-enrollment in college a possibility, they may decide to go back to school. However, the path to a degree also involves persisting through the challenges of the new environment of the institution. Research on nontraditional students has shown that there are practical institutional factors that may facilitate adult persistence once they enroll. The following section will present some of these findings.

Studies have shown that adult students, especially women, and minority students, benefit from advice and encouragement from other students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp & Hughes, 2008; Prins, Toso & Schafft, 2009; Rendon, 1994; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Ashar & Skenes, (1993) found that smaller class size encouraged more interaction and involvement of adult students and was positively related to retention. Other studies have found a correlation between positive interaction with instructors and adult persistence (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason & Lutovsky Quaye, 2010).

Another element of the classroom experience that is widely believed to affect adults' ability to learn successfully is inclusion, or the feeling that they belong (Brookfield, 1990; Wlodkowski, 2008). When adults feel safe and unthreatened, they are freer to experience new ideas, to incorporate them into their way of making meaning of the world (Wlodkowski, 2008).

In addition, adult students have been shown repeatedly to be particularly motivated by coursework that they find relevant to their lives and to their goals (Cox, 2009; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Hirschy, Bremer & Castellano, 2011; Knowles, 1984; Miller & Brickman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1987; Simons, Dewitte & Lens, 2004).

One of the few studies of college students on the subject of the classroom and motivation came to conclusions that closely match the above. Katt and Condly (2009) surveyed 125 college students at a four-year commuter university and found that achievement in class, recognition of their accomplishments from peers and

professors, attention and support from professors, and the perception of the class work as being real world and practical were the most important motivating factors.

A second area of emphasis in the present discussion of ways to enhance student success concerns a structured student degree plan that would convey clear expectations of what courses students need to complete. The use of a structured degree plan that provides students with few choices, but instead presents an understandable, manageable road map to their goals is contrary to general community college practice, but it is speculated that this would be a way to motivate adult students to persist (Karp & Hughes, 2008; Jenkins & Cho, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006).

Academic advising has been shown to have an effect on persistence, but research is scarce for community colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Rosenbaum et al. (2006) point out that the organization of student support services in many colleges assumes that students have enough knowledge, social skills, and motivation to seek out and make use of those available services. In community colleges advising and counseling services tend to be underfunded and underused (Grubb, 2006), and are one of the first services that are eliminated when financial resources are limited (Karp, 2011). Procedural assistance has been shown to be important in several recent studies: step-by-step advice, when students need it, on how to go about reaching one's goals (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp & Hughes, 2008). In addition, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) found that nontraditional students benefited from having clear advice regarding which courses they needed to take to complete a degree plan, in order to avoid taking courses that they did not need.

Other practical institutional variables, for instance convenience, accessibility and course availability, may have an effect on adult student success but they have had little attention in the research. Although Bean and Metzner's (1985) model suggests the importance of these factors, Bailey and Alfonso (2005) observe that these have not been given much emphasis in recent literature, although for adults these might be of primary importance. Rosenbaum et al. (2006), in their study of for-profit occupational schools, found that programs that have shortened semesters and predictable class schedules can increase students' motivation, and their sense that they are making progress, in that they can realistically plan their daily activities around their classes.

Credit for prior work experience is another practice that has gained interest in the present discussion on ways to increase student persistence (Klein-Collins, 2009). Also referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), this strategy for helping adults progress to a degree evaluates adults' college-level knowledge and skills which have been gained at work, in military service, etc. for academic credit. This practice has been shown to help students in that it reduces the number of courses students have to pay for, and reduces the time they have to spend in the classroom (Klein-Collins, 2009). Those institutions that are allowed to accept military tuition assistance are generally required to recognize military service members' work experience and award appropriate college credit (Baker, 2012). Credit is granted using the American Council on Education (ACE) National Guide; 2000 schools presently consider ACE credit recommendations (*American Council on Education*).

In focus at present is the under-preparedness of the majority of students entering community colleges, and the resultant general practice of placing those who need to improve their English and math skills in non-credit bearing remedial courses prior to regular enrollment. This has been shown to negatively affect student persistence (Bailey et al., 2008; Edgecomb, 2011). Several strategies have been examined that might accelerate minimumly underprepared student progress, among them integration of remedial work in credit bearing courses, remedial courses that run parallel to those for which the students are earning credit, and short-term, intensive remedial programs (Edgecomb, 2011).

One last practical variable that has been assumed to have a significant effect on student persistence is financial support, in the form of aid, grants, and scholarships has long been thought to be significant in retention of adults. Research on financial aid and persistence is generally inconclusive, however. Terkla (1984) found high school GPA and degree level goal were more important factors in decisions to persist. Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1992) found that general financial security, whether in the form of financial aid or family support, facilitated academic participation, but that financial aid alone was not enough to influence persistence. Goldrick-Rab (2011) found that increased needs-based aid to low-income students reduced the amount of time the students spent working nights or during the morning. Pascarella et al. (2004) suggest that, for first-generation students, financial aid is only a part of the complex interaction personal and environmental factors. In a similar vein, Mendoza, Mendez and Malcolm (2009) found that when grant money was tied to academic and support components, such as

required course curricula and advisement, persistence improved for minorities and students from lower economic backgrounds.

Institutional Factors Addressed by Military Voluntary Education Programs

Several of the suggestions discussed above that are at present gaining interest have been an integral part of the Department of Defense's (DoD) Voluntary Education Programs for some time. Accessible advisory services, at the education centers located at all bases and posts around the world, are a part of the program (Kime & Anderson, 2000). Military service members drop in at the education center whenever they have time to ask questions, and can expect timely assistance with enrollments, testing, degree plans, or course offerings. Military spouses are given assistance by advisors when applying for MyCAA, Pell Grant, and other military sponsored financial assistance. In addition, student advising, both by in-service educational professionals and on-site institutional personnel, is emphasized, and when students are deciding on a degree plan, required (Kime & Anderson, 2000). The institution develops written degree completion plans for each student. These degree plans list courses required for the degree, those that have been completed with prior learning or through credit for comparable work experience, and those that have still to be completed (Snead & Baridon, 2010). Institutions that are under contract to provide classroom classes at military sites have an on-site representative who is, by contract, available for students who drop in to talk to them. Term schedules are published one year in advance, giving students the opportunity to plan ways to continue to work on their degree plan (Kime & Anderson, 2000). Classes are held on base, when possible even in remote deployed areas. They are held

consistently evenings and weekends to accommodate the schedules of working adults, and class attendance policies accommodate mission commitments, for instance "temporary duty" assignments. Courses are taught in blocks of eight weeks, allowing students to fit them in better around military commitments (Kime & Anderson, 2000). Students may be eligible, once they have enrolled in a college, to receive college credit for previous work experience and military training, as well as through nationally recognized testing, for instance the College Level Examination Program (Kime & Anderson, 2000; Snead & Baridon, 2010). In addition, through the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), a consortium of colleges and universities around the country, college credits earned by military service members at one institution will be accepted into similar programs at other institutions that are part of the SOC consortium. The SOC members also require no more than twenty-five percent of a degree program in residence at the degree granting institution making it easier for mobile students to progress to a degree while taking courses at different institutions (*SOC Consortium*). Both of these features enable mobile students to progress to a degree while taking courses at different institutions.

In conclusion, research suggests that adult students can be helped by several practical institutional and environmental factors. Support and encouragement from other students and from faculty members, and the feeling of inclusion in the classroom environment, have a significant effect, according to some studies, especially for women. The relevance of coursework is also a significant factor in adult classrooms. Advising and counseling have been found to be of significance but are often not widely available. Structured, mandatory degree plans have been

suggested as a further way to increase students' motivation by providing them with a clear road map to their degree. Methods to speed up remedial work or integrate it into credit-bearing courses are also at present being discussed in the literature. Research on financial aid has found that this factor's significance is part of a complex interaction of personal and environmental factors, and is tied to academic and support components, such as required course curricula and advisement. Other factors such as convenience, accessibility and course availability have not been widely addressed in the literature, although they might be of importance in adult decisions to persist.

Military Voluntary Education has addressed several of these factors, and military students have direct access to advisors, either governmental or institutional, and are eligible for financial assistance. Classes are scheduled near where students live, at times and in blocks that make them convenient. In addition, students choose a degree plan, and then take the courses that are necessary for completing that plan, limiting time to degree. They may also receive college credit for previous work experience, and, through the SOC agreements, can transfer credits more easily between institutions. These institutional practices in military Voluntary Education mirror, in many ways, practices that are being explored in the literature on community colleges, and would seem to have the ability to foster greater persistence on the part of military students, and might possibly have relevance for those institutions who are seeking ways to enable adult non-traditional students to persist in their studies.

Conclusion

American community colleges, founded, at least in part, on the American ideal of access and equity for all, have become, over the last century, the main portal to higher education for an ever-increasing number of students, and especially for those students considered nontraditional, who make up the majority of all community colleges today. The benefits of a college education for nontraditional students are many, and serve not only the individual, but also society. However, these students fail, according to the widely-accepted statistics, to persist to a degree. And yet, there is some evidence that adult students who are nontraditional often do make their way to a degree, fitting college around their lives and often taking many years to do it; they may not have "dropped out" but instead have gotten on with their lives at the time. When their life situation permitted, and the motivations to attend were strong enough, they may persist to a degree. The benefits to these students and to their surroundings that accrue from the experience of higher education have not been fully explored, although they might be profound and wide-reaching. In addition, research seems to indicate that adult students seem to possess characteristics and face circumstances detrimental to finishing a degree in a short length of time. However these individuals may return to their studies with qualities such as greater desire to learn, more salient goal commitments, and motivations to change themselves or their environment that may compensate for their lack of time or rusty skills And, finally, millions of Americans are active duty military service members, their spouses or civilian contractors. Hundreds of thousands of these individuals enroll in community college courses every year; nevertheless this

population has received scant attention in the literature. An exploration of the lived experiences of adult college students who pursue their degree while active duty military through the unique and long-established Voluntary Education system would provide a rare insight into ways the military lifestyle interacts with a college education as well as helping to explain the complex process of adult student journeys to an associate's degree.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to enlarge our understanding of the educational experiences of those adult learners in the community college who have completed their associate's degree, during which time they have taken time out from their student role. It was expected that this study would provide nontraditional adult students who have persisted to an associate's degree who are active duty military service members, or the spouses of military service members, to express, in their own voices, the patterns and pathways their college career has taken. It focused on the factors that led them to "step out" and "step back into" college, and the internal and external factors that have served to overcome barriers and distractions they have encountered. By listening to these students' stories, through in-depth interviews, the researcher sought to convey a picture of adult, working students and the dynamics that surrounded their long-term journeys to an associate's degree.

Research Questions

1. What were the initial motives for these students to enroll in higher education?
2. What factors contributed to their discontinuing their studies after their initial enrollment?
3. In what ways do these students perceive their knowledge, beliefs or attitudes have changed since they discontinued their studies after their initial enrollment?

4. In what ways do these students perceive that their lives and personal circumstances have changed since they discontinued their studies after their initial enrollment?
5. What were their reasons for their re-enrollment in college after having dropped out?
6. What factors, personal or environmental, kept them in college this time?
7. In what ways has the experience of being a college student and obtaining a degree affected them or their lives?
8. What are their career and academic plans on completion of their associate's degree?
9. How do they perceive that the experience of attending college while on active duty has helped or hindered their progress?

Methodology

Rationale for Methods

The researcher chose qualitative methodologies as they are most appropriate and useful for achieving the purpose of the study, that of understanding the lived experiences and the educational pathways of long-term adult community college students, and the factors, internal and environmental, that have shaped their journey and finally helped them to persist. Constructivists, or interpretivists, propose that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live, and develop subjective meanings of their experience, which are varied and multiple, "leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). As Creswell points out, the qualitative

researcher's intent is to make sense of the meanings others have about the world (2007). Similarly, Chase notes that, "the stories people tell constitute the empirical material that interviewers need if they are to understand how people create meanings out of events in their lives" (2005, p. 660). And Thomas and Znanieck state "A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives" (1918/1927, p. 1833).

A phenomenological approach was chosen as the most suitable qualitative method. Creswell points out that the phenomenological approach is best used when the type of research:

> …is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (2007, p. 60).

Patton explains that this type of research is based on "the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience*" (2002, p. 106, emphasis in original). And a phenomenological study seeks to depict and find the essence or basic structure of the meaning of an experience (Merriam, 2009) by going directly to "the things themselves…to turn toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them" (Spiegelberg, 1965, p. 658). This

phenomenological study drew on student narratives elicited through in-depth interviews.

Study Participants

The college from which all but one of the participants were drawn is a large community college with its home campus in a Mid-American state. For the last 40 years the college has maintained contracts with the US military forces to provide lower level college courses to active duty service men and women on bases and posts, at various times throughout the continental US, the Pacific Theatre, on shipboard and in Europe and the Middle East. At present the Europe satellite of the college offers courses leading to an associate's degree in several different occupational programs, as well as online programs offering an associate's of general studies, for military service members, their dependents, and civilians stationed at military bases throughout Europe and at deployed sites in the Middle East and Africa. Of the 20 participants, 19 were obtaining their degrees from this community college; 15 were active duty service members or spouses, and four were civilians who worked for the military and lived in the same military communities. One was obtaining an occupational degree from the Community College of the Air Force

Design for Data Collection

Data collection of this study followed the interpretive research design and employed the personal, in-depth interview process (Polkinghorne, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Creswell, 2007). This interview was composed of two parts. The first part employed the technique of "clustering." This interviewing method, originally developed as a technique for creative writers (Rico, 1983), has been adapted and

used successfully in interviews as a research tool to generate thoughts, feelings, images, memories and associations that are related to the focus of the study (Karpiak, 1996). This method is similar to mind-mapping, which has been used by other researchers (Buzan and Buzan, 2000; Wheeldon, 2010). The clustering method of data collection has several advantages for the qualitative researcher who is seeking to "make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them "(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Karpiak (1996) notes that the clustering technique helps the participant to bring to consciousness experiences, emotions, connections or images that the direct question and answer method might not. In addition, clustering allows participants themselves to generate the themes or topics for later exploration, and therefore minimizes prompting or leading by the researcher (Karpiak, 1996; Wheeldon, 2010).

Method for Data Collection

The researcher used several data collection instruments, administered in the following sequence: 1) introductory email requesting basic demographic information about students and an invitation to participate in an interview, 2) the hour-long interview that employed the clustering exercise, followed by an exploration of concepts that were generated by the clustering exercise, 3) member check of interview narrative summary.

Introductory email survey and invitation to participate.

Data on possible participants was obtained from the Office of Student Services of the college's main campus and included all those students who would be completing an associate's degree, or had completed the associate's degree during

the academic year 2011/2012, through the Europe Campus. An introductory letter, in the form of an email, was sent to these students, in accordance with the University of Oklahoma Institutional Research Board. The purpose of the email was to obtain a group of possible participants from which to select 19 or 20 interviewees. Merriam (2009) points out that what is needed is an adequate number of participants to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached. Although the number of participants necessary, in this case, to reach a saturation point could not be determined ahead of time, this number seemed a realistic one to aim for, due to geographical considerations, the fact that military service members are constantly on the move, and the substantial amount of data that would be collected through the in-depth interview process.

The introductory survey email began with an introduction of the researcher, a college administrator and doctoral student, and followed with an explanation of the purpose of the study (See Appendix A), to examine the lived experiences of adult students who step into college, and out again, and then in again to finally finish their degree. It then requested basic demographics of the participants. Basic demographic information was requested in order to include those participants whose basic demographics, diversity, age, and parent's level of education matched as closely as possible the diverse population of community college students in the United States, and the diverse population of active duty service members and their spouses. Similarly Creswell (2007) points out that qualitative research employs purposeful sampling, the selecting of individuals who can add to an understanding

of the research problem of the study. The introductory email then invited the subjects to take part in a one-hour interview at a location of the participant's choice. In addition, the survey letter affirmed the confidentiality of the information that would be shared; students' real names would not be used. Subject consent forms were included in the mailing.

The initial email to all graduating students produced not a single response. There may be several reasons for this initial lack of response. First, the email addresses that were in the data bases maintained by the college's student services department were military email addresses, which, according to several participants, they rarely checked unless they were conducting business correspondence. In addition, these students were highly mobile, and many of the individuals who were included in the database had already moved away. Third, service members are very busy and focused on their daily duties and families, and an invitation to something as unusual as an interview with a doctoral student whom they did not know would not be something to which they might give high priority. The researcher then started searching through the Education Centers where the students were located, and requested from either their instructors or their field representatives that these contact the individuals personally. This approach yielded approximately fourteen participants, all recent graduates, who agreed to the interview. The rest of the participants were obtained in two ways. The first was through suggestions from the field representatives and instructors who contacted students they knew personally, and who were within three or four courses of completing their associate's degree with the college. In addition, the researcher contacted the test proctor at the college

level examination test center near her office, with the request that she mention the study to individuals who were taking tests there who were near completion of their associate's degree. This means identified three additional individuals who were completing their associate's degree and were willing to participate. Seventeen of the twenty participants were stationed at considerable distances from the researcher's office. When the researcher heard that someone had agreed to interview she emailed them the original introductory letter and set up an appointment for the next time the participant was available. During the three months the interviews were carried out, she drove between 100 and 400 miles round trip a total of twelve times to complete the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were held at a time and place that was most advantageous for the student; still, this presented some challenges for both the interviewer and the students being interviewed, as military service members were often not able to predict their day's schedule in advance, due to mission duties or extra duties assigned to them with very little notice. Before the interview, the researcher reiterated the purpose of the study, reaffirmed confidentiality, and explained and collected the subject consent forms, giving a photocopy of the signed consent form to each participant. The researcher also affirmed that students' names would be changed for the final document and, additionally, that individuals and places mentioned by name by participants during the interviews would not be referred to by name in the dissertation.

The interviewer then took the participant through the interview process. This began with a large piece of paper being placed on a table next to the participant, with felt pens in several different colors next to it. The interviewer then stated that the main topic of the interview would address participants' own journey to a college degree, and that the participant was invited to draw a circle in the center of the piece of paper, and label it "My College Journey," and then to "cluster" or generate different branches and bubbles growing from it of the different events and experiences that come to mind. These, as Karpiak (1996) indicated, came in rapid fire, with the participant instinctively creating separate themes and topics around the central topic, and then linking these to other subthemes and subtopics. It is interesting to note here that most of the participants proceeded in a chronological manner, starting with high school, and then addressed themes that involved work, military service, and families, all intertwined with their college journey.

The subsequent interview then centered on an exploration of the clusters the participant had created, and at this point the tape recorder was turned on. The participants were asked to address and explain each cluster with the prompt, "Now take me through your clusters, with as much detail as you wish." Karpiak (1996) notes that, in the interest of non-directedness, participants should not be prompted for more information on any theme, although, before moving on to the next cluster, they might be asked if there is anything else they would like to say, and this is how the interviews proceeded. At the end of the clustering activity the participants were asked what they perceived to be the most significant events or people on their college journey. When participants were finished with their clustering the

interviewer then turned to the original nine questions and directed them to the participants in order to draw out any additional information that had not been addressed in the clustering activity. At the end of the interview I told each recipient they would receive a small gift in the mail.

As often as was possible the researcher entered, on the same day, field notes into a word processing file. These notes included subject name, date and place and time of the interview and additional observations the researcher made, as well as a transcript of the interview, all of which were also entered into word processing files by the researcher herself. Ample space was left on the right side of the page of the written transcripts to make notes of important themes or observations made during the interview.

In the next step, when all interviews had been transcribed, the researcher returned to the original nine questions this study had proposed, and began coding participants' responses to these questions.

Member check notes page.

A copy of a comprehensive narrative summary that had been composed of all transcripts was sent to each participant in order to gather feedback regarding the accuracy of the reported information. This member check step is one in which "the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Merriam (2009) points out that this method for ensuring validity is also called respondent validation. The narrative, rather than the original transcripts were sent, since the former contained an interpretation, made by the researcher, of the common threads, the repeating themes,

of what was said during the interviews, and the salient points or recurring issues that were brought up. Sharing these with the participants allowed a determination whether the research accurately portrayed the themes that were most important and most salient to the participants. During the member check the researcher asked the following questions: 1) What were your reactions as you read the summary? 2) Do you see yourself reflected in the summary, and if so, how? 3) Are there any additions or clarifications to the summary that you would like to discuss? 4) How do you feel about participating in the study? 5) Is there anything you would like to add? Additions or changes requested were noted on a member check notes page created for each individual. Maxwell (2005) notes that this step is not only the best way to ensure you are not misinterpreting what the participants said, it is also an important way of identifying researcher bias and misunderstandings of what was said. Creswell (2007) includes a member check as one of those steps most important in assuring a qualitative study's validity.

Methods of Analysis and Synthesis of Data

In a phenomenological study participant narratives are first transcribed word for word. The researcher then begins a process of noting sentences or quotes that provide understandings of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Clusters of meaning are then developed that reflect these "significant statements" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). These are refined and reduced until the essence of the phenomenon is revealed. The final description of the phenomenon should leave the reader with the feeling, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Reliability in a quantitative study refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Merriam, 2009). That is, if the study were repeated, would it yield the same results? In qualitative research, however, the question, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is whether the results are consistent with the data collected. One way of ensuring reliability is an audit trail that outlines the research process and the process through which codes and categories are developed (Creswell, 2007).The analysis and synthesis of data involved a stepwise process that began with a transcription of the interview and accompanying field notes of observations made during the interviews, a summary of the interviews, which was shared with the participants, and stepwise data reduction and conclusion-drawing. After the verbatim transcripts were typed, read and re-read the researcher began developing an initial coding system to identify and sort recurring and salient themes. These codes were taken from themes raised by the participants themselves as well as from the original nine questions this study had proposed and from the literature review. The review of the literature covered a broad range of possible themes that students could touch on, but, as Creswell (2007) notes, using pre-figured codes serves to limit the analysis to these codes; opening up the codes to reflect what participants really say follows more closely the method of qualitative inquiry. This researcher used the following steps to codify and find categories and themes surrounding the original nine questions.

Step one: The transcripts were read and reread, and then using color coding, these were broken down into segments of data that seemed to respond to the original questions.

Step two: Data that represented like themes were then grouped together, for instance, different recurring themes that emerged from answers to the questions "How they were after high school" or "How they perceive they have may changed as a result of obtaining a college degree." These data pieces included the name of the participant so that the researcher could return to the original transcript to review the original context of the quote (Merriam, 2009).

Step three: When all twenty of the transcripts had been codified into themes that responded to the original nine questions, these were then examined for recurring themes or categories that were responsive to the purpose of the research (Merriam, 2009). As Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest, a category can be considered important in accordance with the number of people who mention it. These themes were related back to the literature on adult development and learning and on adult participation in formal education, as well as to recent literature on factors that encourage adult student success at community colleges. Another guideline Guba and Lincoln suggest concerns categories that reveal "areas of inquiry not otherwise recognized" (1981, p. 95). Keeping this in mind, as well as Creswell's (2007) observation, above, about the importance of opening up the coding to what the participants really say, and not limiting analysis to the original questions, the researcher approached the data looking not only for answers to these questions, but also for any other, different recurring themes.

Step four: The participants were sent a four-page member check which they were invited to answer the following questions: 1) What were your reactions as you read the summary? 2) Do you see yourself reflected in the summary, and if so, how?

3) Are there any additions or clarifications to the summary that you would like to discuss? 4) How did you feel about participating in the study? 5) Is there anything you would like to add?

Step Five: The researcher described the findings and her interpretations from the data analysis using thick, rich description and employing specific quotes from the participants to support the findings concerning themes and patterns identified by the researcher.

Credibility

The terms validity and reliability do not generally apply in qualitative research approaches. Instead terms such as credibility are used to judge the soundness of a qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) points out that what qualitative research is exploring is not the positivistic concept of reality, but rather individuals' construction of reality, and interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their stories. Denzin and Lincoln note that researchers concerned with exploring what lies behind the data "rely increasingly on the experiential, the embodied, the emotive qualities of human experience" (2005, p. 205). Thus, in qualitative research credibility is based on the extent to which our account is an accurate reflection of what our participants said (Creswell, 2007). Guba and Lincoln explain that credibility results when a study's conclusions are "sufficiently authentic…that I may trust myself in acting on the implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them?" (2003, p. 274).

Qualitative research can never capture an objective reality; however credibility in qualitative research can be increased through the use of multiple data sources, multiple methods, multiple researchers or multiple theories (Denzin, 1978). Several methods were used, including field notes, transcriptions, interviews, member check, and relevant literature on the subject. The in-depth interviews provided for rich description in the findings, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability; the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study. Another criteria related to credibility is researcher bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This bias was avoided to the extent that the researcher first allowed the participants to cluster their experiences, and explain them in detail, without interjecting. Further, as the interviews did reveal information that was unexpected, the researcher was sent back to the literature for confirmation of what had been revealed by the participants.

The Researcher

My education and early professional background is rooted in the theory and practice of adult development and adult education, as well as in organizational leadership. Through these studies and work experience I had come to have deep love for teaching adults, a respect for their courage in going back to school, their accumulated wisdom and tenacity, and an intense interest in ways that institutions and educators can foster academic success for adult, nontraditional students.

In addition, as a community college administrator I have, in my various capacities, worked as a college representative at education centers at a number of military bases in Germany, as course curriculum coordinator and as graduation

coordinator, and in so doing have witnessed at first hand the journeys of these adult students. As a college representative I have watched students hesitantly approach the start of a college degree, and advised them on the best way to start, have accompanied them through their educational stops and re-starts, have tutored them in math and English and listened to their stories of the trials and triumphs of their college journeys. In addition, I have personally experienced how some of the unique processes and regulations the military has established have seemed to improve their chances for success, and I was deeply interested in exploring lived experiences of how it is to get a college degree within the framework of military voluntary education. In my position as curriculum coordinator I have trained and advised adjunct faculty on course content and teaching strategies, and have learned to appreciate the enthusiasm and talent of these individuals, most of them active duty service members themselves, and their passion for encouraging their soldiers to gain academic skills and actively pursue college. Finally, as graduation coordinator I have had the privilege of observing and interacting with adult students who have managed, with many false starts, stop-outs and hindrances, to complete their associate's degree despite often seemingly insurmountable barriers and extensive time lapses. In my many discussions with students who are near completion of their degree, I have often noticed a quiet tenacity, a quality of academic and personal self-reliance not seen in the beginning community college students. Through all this I have gained a great respect for these students' inner resources and drive, and have noticed, time and again, that even if their college degree took them many years to complete, upon completion of their degree they appeared to have been affected in

positive ways by their journey, and to be different from those adults who, at their age, had not completed college.

In my research for this study on adult community colleges, and how institutions can nurture them and encourage them to succeed, I found little research on these adult students themselves, and none on military service members who are pursuing college. I have a very strong humanistic/constructivist perspective on life, however, and can never stray far from my conviction that it is the adult student him or herself who is the most important factor in determining his or her academic success, and that to best help these adult students we must first listen to their stories of individual journeys, of their perceptions of those factors or experiences or people who were significant in their eventual academic success. Adelman (2006) urged for a "change in the language we use in describing what happens to students from a negative rhetoric that assumes passivity to one that respects students as active players, seeking and discovering paths to their education goals" (p. xxvi). I decided to do just that.

Limitations and Assumptions

In order to be able to provide the rich description of in-depth interviews, the sample size was somewhat limited in order to provide sufficient time to thoroughly record and analyze the participants' responses. Therefore the results of the study are not necessarily generalizable to another setting. However, Lincoln and Guba suggest the notion of transferability in qualitative researcher rests on the reader, who needs to decide if the findings of a study are applicable in his or her own situation, and it

is up to the investigator to provide "sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible" (1985, p. 298).

Another limitation may be inherent in the self-nominating survey method, which allows participants to self-select and may result in biases. In the case of this research study, the researcher relied on individuals who knew individuals who were suitable participants. Due to the nature of the participants' careers and lifestyles, the purposive sampling method was the only method of obtaining a suitable number of participants within a reasonable amount of time. Another limitation lies with the nature of the in-depth interview which, although it allow participants to express in depth their experiences, opinions and perspectives, is nevertheless dependent on self-reports which might reflect individual biases or assumptions. A final limitation may be the researcher herself. As in all phenomenological studies, this study is interpretive in nature, meaning that the researcher is an interpreter of the data (van Maanen, 1990). Interpretation involves some degree of subjectivity. Qualitative research does not aim to capture reality, however. The goal is to uncover "people's constructions of reality–how they understand the world" (Merriam, 2009, p.14) and the researcher's own interpretation of reality is a part of the process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the life journeys of long-term adult students, who may attain their degree many years after they first enrolled. Based on the purpose of the study, a qualitative method was chosen, which utilized interpretivism as a research design to explore the experiences of twenty participants who had not completed college right after high school, but instead had enlisted in

the military service or married a service member or worked at other jobs. They had finally finished a degree, most of them many years later, and had fit college going around their lives. Data was collected through approximately one-hour in-depth interviews, audio-taped and transcribed. Data were analyzed qualitatively following the guidelines of interpretivism, using the frameworks of adult learning and development theories and research on practices that facilitate adult persistence in higher education. In addition, the data were analyzed through the lens of theory and research on decisions to enlist and the influence of the military lifestyle on service members and their spouses. Techniques and procedures were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings, including member checking and thick, rich, descriptive writing. Finally, limitations of this study regarding the research methodology and the researcher's background were discussed.

The findings, discussions and implications follow, in Chapters Four and Five Chapter Four focuses on presenting the research findings that answer the original nine questions. Chapter Five discusses the research findings within the framework of the literature on adult development and institutional practices that foster adult persistence, and concludes with the implications for practice for educational policy makers, administrators, educators and adults; suggestions for further research, and concludes with final remarks to the study as a whole.

Chapter Four

The Research Findings: They Self-Ignited

The purpose of this study was to explore the journeys toward an associate's degree of adult students who are active duty military service members, their spouses or civilian contractors working for the military on base. There is limited in-depth research in the literature on long-term individual pathways to an education of working adults, and a resulting general consensus that these adult, non-traditional students are a problem, as they do not finish their degrees in a timely manner. This study was intended to discover the lived experiences of adult students who did finish a degree, in order to present a more nuanced picture, through hour-long semi-structured interviews, of the context of their lives, initial barriers to higher education, their motivations and goals for enrolling later on, their strategies that helped them persist, and educational outcomes. A second purpose of this study was to explore the effects of the military lifestyle, and the specific processes and programs put into place by the Department of Defense Voluntary Education program, on the educational journeys of the participants as they have experienced them.

The participants, at the time of the study, were stationed at military bases in Europe. The were all recent graduates of, or about to graduate from, a large American community college that, under a Department of Defense Tri-Services contract, provides classroom classes in vocational technical programs on base, and also offers an extensive program of online courses leading to an associate's in general studies.

An initial effort was made to contact, through e-mail communication, the recent graduates of the institution. When this first attempt failed to yield any participants, the researcher turned to instructors and field representatives at various Education Centers, who kindly agreed to contact directly or provide the names of those students who were recent or near graduates. The researcher also turned to the test proctor at the National Test Center nearby, who provided the names of individuals who were taking college level tests and had nearly completed an associate's degree. This effort yielded 20 participants, who were either near completion or had completed their degree, 19 of them with the above institution and one individual with the Community College of the Air Force. The participants, as it happened, were at the time located throughout various locations in Europe. Given the geographic distance of some of the participants at the time of the study, the researcher made 10 round trips of between 60 and 400 miles each to interview them.

In the complex, evolving life stories of these twenty participants several themes were identified that represent the phases of their personal and social development, as well as their involvement with life as active duty service members, their spouses, or as civilian employees.

Theme One: Life circumstance and motivations after high school

Theme Two: Reasons for military enlistment

Theme Three: Life in the military and initial barriers to participation

Theme Four: Personal growth and change, and environmental influences

Theme Five: Motivations and precipitators for enrollment

Theme Six: The higher education experience

Theme Seven: Facing the challenges of college, military career and family

Theme Eight: The aftermath: How they may have changed.

Theme Nine: Taking college courses in a military environment

Chapters Four and Five address the experiences of these twenty military service members and spouses as they complete, or are close to completing, their associate's degree while stationed at military installations in Europe. Specifically, Chapter Four presents the findings of the proposed research questions, while Chapter Five focuses on the discussions of these findings. Chapter Four begins with the background of these twenty research participants and then outlines the seven major themes identified from the findings.

Background of the Research Participants

The research participants consisted of twenty Americans, members of the military community stationed at bases in Europe. Eleven were active duty Army service members, one was active duty Air Force. Four were female spouses of active duty service members. One was retired Air Force, working on a military installation as a civilian. An additional three female participants were working as civilians on military installations. All participants had either recently completed an associate's degree or were within several credits of completing the degree. Sixteen had completed, or were completing, a degree in vocational-technical program. Of these, five had completed a degree in Criminal Justice, five in Childhood Development, one in Automotive Technology, one in Hospitality Management, one

in Business Management and one in Communications. Four had completed an Associate in General Studies degree. Two participants had completed two associate's degrees, one with degrees in Business Management and in Applied Management with Computer, and one with degrees in General studies and in Criminal Justice. Those in Criminal Justice, Childhood Development, Automotive Technology and Hospitality Management had taken a considerable number of their vocational-technical related courses in the classroom on base, with online courses being the predominant method of delivery for the rest.

Introduction of the Participants

Active duty service members.

Nicholas, 35, is a senior NCO in the Army, married with three children and of Latino/Hispanic ethnic background. He started taking college courses right after enlistment, has received his degree in criminal justice, and has already started on a bachelor's in criminal justice.

William, 39, is a senior NCO in the Army, married with one child and white. William began his degree in criminal justice, but transferred to general studies after several deployments, and has finished his degree. He plans to become a history teacher and/or ROTC instructor.

Walter, 41, is a senior NCO in the Army, is married with three children, and is African American. He has worked in the Army in logistics. He has received his associate's degree in general studies and plans on using the GI Bill to pursue a bachelor's in logistics management.

Haley, 25, is an enlisted member of the Air Force. She is divorced with one child and white. She started college after high school, dropped out and worked several good jobs, and then enlisted. She works as a media broadcast specialist, and her associate's degree is in communications. She plans to continue to a bachelor's in psychology, and wants to become a counselor.

Bret, 35, is a senior NCO in the Army, white, married with one child. He has worked as a helicopter mechanic, and has received an associate's degree in general studies. He plans to continue to a degree in mechanical engineering.

Leandra, 25, is married with no children, an NCO in the Army, and is of White/Mexican ethnic origin. She enlisted right out of high school, and worked first in infantry and later in finance. Her associate's degree is in general studies, and she is already pursuing a bachelor's in history.

Tom, 34, is a senior NCO in the Army, white, married with two children. He enlisted right after high school, worked as a military policeman, is receiving an associate's degree in criminal justice, and has plans to continue to a bachelor's in criminal justice or history.

Lee, 31, is married with four children, a senior NCO in the Army, and African American. He works as a supervisor in dining facilities, and is receiving an associate's degree in hospitality management, with plans to continue to a bachelor's degree in a related field.

Martin, 30, is single, an Army NCO, and of Hispanic ethnic background. His associate's degree is in criminal justice, and he plans to leave the Army soon and continue his education, if possible to eventually earn a degree in law.

James, 32, is a senior NCO in the Army, married with two children, and African American. Accepted to a well-known Eastern university right after high school, but unable to afford the tuition, he enlisted and works in combat arms as a tanker. He has earned an associate's degree in criminal justice. He plans to go on to a bachelor's in criminal justice.

Antonio, 28, is a senior Army NCO, married with four children, and of Hispanic ethnic origin. He is receiving two associate's degrees, one in general studies and one in criminal justice, and plans to continue to a bachelor's degree in criminal justice or homeland security.

Hector, 35, is a senior Army NCO, married with three children, and of Hispanic ethnic origin. He emigrated from Mexico at age 15, and is a mechanic in the Army. His degree is in automotive mechanic, and his bachelor's degree, which he is already working on, will be in business management.

Civilian employees.

Brigita, 48, is working as a civilian employee, is married to Ed in this study, and has one grown daughter. She was raised and initially educated in a Balkan country. She stopped out before finishing her engineering degree because of the war, and the birth of her daughter, and worked for years in IT. Later she met and married her American husband, Ed, also a participant in this study. She has earned two associate degrees, in computer management and business management. She plans to go on to at least a bachelor's in either business management or computer management.

Ed, 49, is an American civilian working on a military base, is married to Brigita, has two children by a former marriage and is white. He is a former Air Force enlisted service member, and worked while in the service as a machinist. He later worked as a civilian contractor to the military as a mechanic. He is receiving one associate's degree in business management and another in general studies.

Mia, 57, is separated, with four children, one still at home, and is of Hispanic ethnic background. The child of Air Force parents who had been stationed in Germany, she early married a German resident and has worked for many years at child development centers in Germany. Her associate's degree will be in early childhood education. Her dream is to become a teacher.

Lila, 39, is an American civilian working on a military base, married with two children, and African American. She has worked for years in a child development center, and her associate's degree is in early childhood. She plans to continue to a degree in teaching grade school.

Military spouses.

Lauren, 22, is married to an Army enlisted service member, has no children and is white. She started college after high school, in nursing, and will be receiving her associate's degree in early childhood development. She plans to get her bachelor's and certification in teaching to work with older children.

Melissa, 35, is married to an Air Force senior NCO, has three children and is white. Melissa has a management position in an Air Force child development center, and plans to continue to a bachelor's degree and then to a master's degree in early childhood education.

Charlotte, 43, is married to an Army senior NCO, with three children and white. She originally wanted to go to nursing school, but when she finally had time to work on a degree a nursing program was not available. Her associate's degree is in criminal justice. She plans to continue to a degree in psychology and possibly work for the police department in the town where they will move once her husband retires.

Luisa, 42, is married to an Army senior NCO, with two children, and of Hispanic ethnic origin. She has worked as a teacher's aid in schools her children were attending, and is receiving her degree in early childhood education. She plans to continue to a bachelor's degree and eventually teach school.

The above background information suggests that the process that led each of these students to finally finish an associate's degree was unique to each. One characteristic they all have in common, however, is that after high school they did not follow a traditional college trajectory and complete a college degree, but soon took on the traditional responsibilities of adulthood, either raising a family or earning money or both. Thus, the first theme of the research findings explores their life circumstance and motivations right after high school.

To preserve the actual lived and spoken experience of these participants, material quoted from the interviews is unaltered. Several of the participants were bi-lingual, with English as their second language, and the interviews reflect in several cases, an additional struggle of having to overcome a new language as they pursued college.

Theme One: Life Circumstance and Motivations after High School

Due to life circumstances or factors that motivated them personally at the time, these participants either did not enroll in college or stopped out before completing a degree. These reasons can be divided into several different themes: 1) they lacked salient goals that motivated them to attend, or stay in, college, 2) life circumstances got in the way, and 3) the environment did not offer sufficient support or encouragement

Lack of Salient Goals

For some, college was not something they considered seriously right out of high school. Several participants recalled the relief they felt when high school was over, and they did not have to sit in another class. Although most pointed out that high school had not been particularly difficult for them they had not worked at it, but had coasted along in high school doing the minimum amount of work necessary to graduate. Several of the participants were more interested in making money at decent jobs they had landed right out of high school, and at the time felt this was enough. Three who did start college soon stopped out because they were enjoying the social life that college afforded, and they did not do well enough to continue. Lee recalled, "I was playing football at the community college, I was a good athlete, but I wasn't dedicated to the school. I barely participated in the classroom at all." For these participants, learning in the classroom, whether in high school or in college, was not, at the time, something they were willing to concentrate on. Another participant, Lauren, on the other hand had wanted to go to college, and had started out enthusiastically, but soon realized that she was in a nursing program not

because she wanted to, but because others thought she should, and she soon lost interest.

In summary, these participants had not yet developed personal goals that would have made the effort and sacrifice of college attendance seem necessary to them. Moreover, pressing life circumstances further intruded on their path to college attendance after high school.

Life Circumstances Got in the Way

The second sub-theme for these participants as they left high school is that they soon took on adult responsibilities. Several of the participants indicated that they had long had a desire to go to college, but started a family very young. This was particularly true of the male participants of Hispanic background. Nicholas remembered, "Well, I would say I became a father in 1994. I was a junior in high school. I had aspirations of going to college at that time; however, I had to mature very quickly." This responsibility forced them to postpone their plans for college as they strove to support and care for a family. There were exceptions. Lauren, Brigita and Haley had all been good students in high school, and liked studying, but for reasons over which they had little control, they ended their studies before finishing. Brigita was hampered in completing her degree by a war in her country and the birth of a child. Lauren and Haley had personal issues that got in the way. Problems with their parents led to the necessity of moving out from home; the price of both paying for college and supporting themselves and, in Lauren's case, a spouse, became prohibitive, and they unwillingly stopped out.

In summary, this group of participants might have continued in college, but life had handed them too many hurdles, such as the need to support themselves or a family, to make college possible for them at the time.

Lack of Support or Encouragement from Family or Environment

The third sub-theme involves the participants' environment or family, and a lack of direct encouragement or support to attend college. Several of the participants indicated college was not something their parents expected of them, that they had seriously discussed at home, or that they had learned about from their schools or peers. For instance, one participant had been a gifted student in a high school for underprivileged children, and was accepted at a highly competitive college, but when it came time to enroll and then pay the tuition, he received no guidance on how he could manage this, and gave up the opportunity. Several participants mentioned the lack of importance, in their culture, attached to college attendance. Luisa pointed out that, "In my culture the man is the provider," and, because her husband was in school "I figured, let him go to college and I'm going to stay at home, take care of the family." Another student was expected to work after high school to help put his sister through college first. Lila, on the other hand, stopped out of college because she missed her family, and her family missed her. As she recalls, "First time away from home, I'm the baby, the last born, my mom and dad really wanted me to go but they didn't, and I really didn't want to go. I wasn't ready to leave mom and dad's house." In some families, enlistment in the military was the accepted path to take after high school, and several joined the Army for this reason.

Bret: "In about 10th grade I decided I wasn't going to college, I was joining the Army, and it's kind of a family thing, everybody joins the Army."

In summary, these sub-themes suggest that the participants did not enroll in college, or did not continue in college right after high school because of several factors: they did not see college as instrumental to goals they might have had, they were hindered by life circumstances and needed to make a living and, finally, they lacked the support and interest of their families or surroundings that they would have needed to enroll and continue in college.

Most of the participants soon enlisted in the military instead of enrolling seriously in college, or married a military service member. The following section will explore the reasons the participants revealed about their decisions to enlist.

Theme Two: Enlistment

College was not a salient goal for these individuals. However, they were motivated to join the military; most of the participants indicated that they enlisted without much consideration or doubt. As the following discussion reveals, the reasons are closely intertwined with a desire to improve their lives, and to mold themselves into something better, although they may not have known, at the time, what that would be.

To Provide a Secure Life

For some, the reasons involved the need to make a decent, secure living, and they saw service in the military as their best chance. Ed recalled "…and then the job market fell out [of the oil drilling business in Texas] and I had to find work elsewhere, and I couldn't find any so then I joined the Air Force." Nicholas, like the

others, had pressing family responsibilities. He says, “Graduated from high school and six days later I was attending basic training. My main priority was taking care of my family.”

To See the World

A desire to see more of the world than the small corner of the America of their origins was another recurring motif. Travel or living in other parts of the county or the world is not something they would have been able to do on their own. Walter, from a small town in the south, recalls, “I was ready to get out of my little home town, which is a very small, one-traffic-light kind of town, had to get away from there. As a young kid I never did travel or do anything like that so I decided to join the military.”

To be Able to Go to College

As the interviews proceeded, a recurring theme concerning reasons for enlistment was the importance, to the participants, of the oppportunity to use military tuition assistance and attend college while on active duty. As discussed in the literature, this is one of the most important and powerful recruiting tools the military possesses. William was working in landscaping and was in the Reserves, but wanted a more secure career, and, “…then if they were going to give me an opportunity to go to school, wow.” James, who had just found out that he had no idea how to finance attendance at the prestigious school where he had been accepted, saw an Army recruiting poster. He recalls, “Luckily I saw this sign that said earn $40,000 for college, I was like, where do I sign?”

To Remake Themselves

Finally, for some of the participants, enlisting in the military seemed a way not only to make college possible and provide themselves and their families with a secure living, but also to mold themselves into something they wanted to become. Haley had left home and dropped out of college because of her problems with her parents, and after several unsuccessful jobs and relationships, made a conscious decision to learn the self-discipline she had not learned at home by joining the Air Force. William decided to "go active duty to make something of myself."

In conclusion, joining the military offered the participants, they believed, a chance to improve the life they could offer their families, an opportunity to see the world, an increased opportunity to go to college, and a way to mature and to remold themselves into a better person. Still, their experiences as adults in the military, or married to a military spouse, presented further challenges that needed to be faced before serious enrollment in college was possible, as explored through the following theme.

Theme Three: Life in the Military and Barriers to the Pursuit of College

Although the possibility of college was one of the main reasons the active duty military service members in the study mentioned when asked about their decision to enlist, all participants in this study indicated that, after they enlisted, career and family had to take first priority. In addition, there were personal reasons many of these participants did not enroll in college when they might have. The work and personal obstacles are addressed in the following section.

Active Duty Pressures

As they started to build their careers, the active duty members were in their twenties; a career in the military involves extensive training, constant moves, irregular shifts, leadership responsibilities, and the constant pressure to fulfill requirements needed for promotion, and can leave no time for the thought of college. James, who had had a successful military career until now, sums up his years in the Army: "I've been in the military now for 15 years and I pretty much went my first 13 years not even thinking about college." Several other participants had enjoyed themselves when they weren't working, and had felt that working on a career and enjoying a social life were enough. Walter recalled, "It was me, my car and my room, and on the weekends me, my car and my room went out to have fun. College was not in that subject area anywhere."

Others kept trying, and would take a course here or there, as military assignments allowed. Nicholas, who enlisted to support a family, started taking college courses right after enlistment. As he says, "The edge of college never left me." However, many, especially early in their careers, had had no opportunity pursue college seriously. Either there were no classes offered when they were off duty, or there was no internet access, or their career really had to take first priority. William recalled trying to take courses in the early 2000's at deployed sites, an experience all of the military service members had:

> The third time I was deployed I was platoon SGT and that's a full time plus job doing planning, missions, and getting ready and all this nonsense; it was really tough, so I just decided to wait.

Family-Related and Personal Reasons for Not Enrolling

Not only were the military service members hindered from pursuing college by deployments, so too were the military spouses, who had to be both mother and father to their children while their husbands were deployed. Melissa, mother of three teen-agers, recalled, "You figure that, with all these deployments, most of my life journey has been as a single mom." Melissa explained her routine for taking college courses; when her husband was home, she could squeeze in two a semester. When he was gone, she felt that, as she was employed full time, one course was all she could manage and still look after her children and be there for them. Frequent moves also had limited her ability to take courses; packing up and then settling her family in and finding a new job had to be her first priorities.

Several of the women participants had to work through personal issues before they could think of going to college. On the outside their life might have seemed orderly enough, but they were suffering from crises, related to their family or their past, that made the thought of college impossible. Haley had had several unhappy romantic relationships and a stormy relationship with her parents, and although she was a decent airman, she was also overweight, lacked self-discipline in her personal life, and was a single mother. She realized that her lack of self-esteem had gotten in the way of her ability to think about college. Similarly, Lauren, as noted above, had stopped going to college. Then her husband enlisted in the Army. She moved around with him, from duty station to duty station, and helped him with his career, but did not know what she really wanted to study, and was unhappy.

"Education, that's all that I knew. I had done so well in high school and afterwards I was lost for a while, I got depressed. I stopped working out."

Other participants were also hesitant to enroll because they did not know what they should study. They realized that college would be good for them and their futures, but they did not know how to get started, or what might be possible for them. Martin, for instance, observed, "(College) was always something I wanted to do, but I didn't know what I wanted to major in or anything, I knew what I liked doing, but I didn't know how to apply it to a college degree."

In summary, although life became more financially secure after enlistment, pressures caused by military duties, constant moves, personal issues and indecisions about what to study hindered participants from seriously pursuing a college degree, often for many years.

Theme Four: Enrollment: Personal and Environmental Factors

The next section discusses the circumstances under which participants finally got serious about pursuing an education. It begins with findings concerning how the participants felt they had changed since high school, and then addresses the environmental factors that might have increased their interest in getting a college degree, and their expressed motivations for becoming serious about a college degree.

Changes in Habits and Beliefs

One feature most of the participants mentioned, as they looked back at who they were right after high school, and compared that person to the person they had become, was their view that they were a different person now. They all mentioned

that they had matured, and left behind some of their earlier habits or beliefs that might have kept them from being serious students. Luisa summed it up well: "I got all the partying out of my system, I got the 'going out' out of my system and now it was time for me to become a mother and a responsible adult." Lauren realized that she was her own person, and that she did not have to study what others wanted her to study, but that she could do whatever really interested her. Haley had worked her way through personal problems, and had learned to respect herself, and realized she could now, as she said, "invite college into my life."

Another change the participants mentioned was their sense of determination. Discipline and determination are demanded of service members, and of their spouses, and whether the participants would have developed these qualities if they had not enlisted cannot easily be measured. But they had learned these qualities. Lee observed this about how he had changed: "Oh my. Completely, 360 times 2, 360 times 2, because if I had had the determination that I have now, at 31, if I had had it at 19, I could be anything."

Many of the participants mentioned that the responsibilities of family life and military life matured them very quickly, and opened their eyes to the importance of taking advantage of ways to improve their lives. Antonio recalls a change in himself that led to an ability to appreciate the chance to go to college: "Once I got into my deployments I was more appreciative of opportunities, whereas before I just would have let them go by."

One major factor that helped them decide to enroll in college seriously was a positive experience in a classroom, leading to a change in their sense of their own

self-efficacy as a student. After successfully taking his first college course, Nicholas grew to become someone who actually considered himself a college student:

. Because after completing the first course, and once I felt comfortable, I wasn't afraid any more, I was looking to try and TAKE another course. I did feel a change in the sense that, you know what, I stood up to the fear, I confronted it, I dealt with it, and it worked out for the best. It's not that scary.

Looking back, the participants could all recount ways they had changed, and they were, without exception, in their view, positive.

The following sub-theme addresses the more subtle ways that life as a military service member or spouse may have brought about a change in these participants that opened them eventually for serious college enrollment.

Environmental Factors Related to Decisions to Enroll

As the interviews progressed, the evidence increased that part of the reason these military service members and their spouses were finally able to commit to college attendance was the result of their participation in the military community and military lifestyle.As many of the participants pointed out, their lives, as career military service members, while not luxurious, were financially secure. Hector mentioned that while he was in the Army his wife did not need to work to support the family. Luisa indicated that her husband would prefer she did not work, but that she wanted to work to help support her grandmother, and to be able to afford luxury items. Lauren worked only one or two days a week taking care of children in her home, and had the time to do volunteer work. In addition, the participants could

plan on a relatively secure future. All the service members had a pretty good idea about how many more years they would be "serving Uncle Sam," and what kind of a pension they would have once they "got out," as well as how much tuition assistance they could expect from the G.I. Bill. It is possible to speculate that the relatively stable and financially secure environment of the military fostered their eventual readiness to enroll seriously.

Another notable finding of the study regarded the spouses of the participants who were active duty service members. As already discussed, most of the participants who were service members had enlisted in large part to support a wife and family that they had started at a young age. Most of them were now in a second marriage, and in nearly all cases these new wives were either working on their own higher education, had already had a solid education, or were very supportive of their husbands' efforts. Nicholas, William and James had married German citizens, whom they had met while being stationed in Germany, and all echoed Nicholas, who related, "…my wife, she's very supportive… a certified dental assistant, here in Germany, with X-ray, background in radiology and clinics, she's also a hygienist…Education is a big push in my family and I have her support." Lee and Antonio had remarried, and their second wives, whom they had met in the Army, were American; these women also had positive attitudes toward education, as Antonio reveals, "My wife actually plays a big part in motivating me to go to school because she was a soldier and now she's using her GI bill to go to school." Walter had not married a childhood sweetheart, but had married for the first time when he

already had a solid career, with a future, in the military. His wife was also academically ambitious:

> And so I guess when she met me and we got married I guess she thought that was a good opportunity to start back (in college) because she had a babysitter (laughs). So she started doing her education thing and I still wasn't really doing anything.

In all these cases the active duty service members, after they had established careers, married women who either already had an education or were determined to pursue higher education. It is possible to speculate that had these military service members remained at home, in factory, landscaping or installation jobs, they may not have been able to attract these upwardly-mobile spouses.

Another social factor that may have helped bring about change in the participants who were active duty service members centers on the emphasis, in the military, on training and on continuous learning, for the military job. Sitting in a classroom, listening to lectures, taking tests, all activities they had been required to do and were able to do, may have made them more open to taking on the rigors of learning for college credit. In addition, seeing that they could succeed in a demanding and rigorous environment that required leadership qualities may have influenced their general sense of their ability to succeed at new challenges such as higher education.

Theme Five: Motivations and Precipitators to Enrollment

These participants had all matured and become more serious in their outlook on life, and had earned a certain financial security; however this is probably true of

many of those service members and their spouses who never decide to enroll in college. As was discussed in the literature, a decision to devote all ones free time over a period of several years to pursuing college is a major decision, and would suggest being preceded by a perceived personal need or strong motivation.

The following addresses the participants' expressed motivations for enrolling in college, and then, in turn, to what, or who, the participants felt precipitated their final enrollment and serious work on a degree. Findings concerning their expressed motivations are followed with a discussion of the practical, extrinsic motivations as well as what the participants revealed about their more personal or intrinsic motivations.

Extrinsic Motivations

Extrinsic motivation, or the performance of an activity in order to attain some outcome that is separate from the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000), initially propelled many of the participants to become serious about their college education. Practical consideration are often cited in the literature as the reasons adults go back to college, among them better employment opportunities or more financial security. The same was true for many of the participants in this study, most of whom were also considering the future in practical terms. Military service members are encouraged to complete a college degree in order to get promoted. Moreover most of the active duty soldiers indicated that it is becoming almost necessary to have not only some college, but a college degree, in order to reach the next rank and remain in the military. Tom stated it succinctly "That hit me hard, last year's E7 list–that

guy is a total turd, how did he get promoted over me? He's got his degree and I don't. So, I thought, I should probably get on that degree thing."

For most enlisted service members who successfully remain in the service, retirement comes after approximately 22 years of active duty. They will have earned a pension, but it is not enough to support a soldier and family in the way they have become used to. Hector and many others were thinking hard about life after active duty military service:

> I'm OK right now in the Army, but nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow. Right now the Army is carrying a lot of soldiers, and I can be one of them tomorrow, and if I don't have any college, I don't have a degree, my life is going to be very hard out there.

Walter had already started to research available positions for the time after the Army, and had realized that he would need college in order to continue the comfortable lifestyle he and his family enjoyed in the military once he retired:

> I have to be able to find a job that's going to put me at my same comfort level where I am now or better. I can't do that without an education. Every time I look at a job application it's asking for a bachelor's degree, not an associate's or anything like that, it's always saying the minimum is a bachelor's degree, so I have to do something to make that happen.

Similarly, Melissa stated a practical reason for wanting a college degree–it was necessary if she wanted to continue in her chosen career path as a Child Development Center manager. Brigita as well was getting the formal credit for what she already knew how to do, office and computer management. Hector was a

mechanic in the Army, and had been fixing cars as a hobby. When he found out that the base where he was stationed offered automotive mechanic program, he got serious about a degree. “I noticed if I get my degree in fixing cars, one day I have to retire or for any reason have to leave the Army, I know I can find a job pretty much anywhere.”

More Personal Reasons

These above-mentioned practical motivations were intertwined in nearly every participant’s story with more personal reasons for wanting a college degree. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain these as extrinsic motivations that involve personal endorsement and a feeling of choice. Personal reasons seemed to be more important for most of the women in this study, and also for the men who were African-American or of Hispanic ethnic origin. These individuals mentioned very often the effect their degree would have on their families. Antonio, and most others, wanted to be a good role model for their children or siblings. Antonio was thinking of his children by his first wife, and explained, “Nobody in her family has finished high school and I’m not around very much…so seeing as they won’t have anyone at home to see as far as education goes, the only thing I can do for them is ‘see, my dad went to college’.” Walter realized that his children would take his educational aspirations for them more seriously if he too had a college education, and recalled, “And again, for my kids, I can’t force them to be, I can’t say that education is great if I don’t have it. I have the opportunity to do it so I’d might as well do it, and be a good role model for them.”

Luisa as well seemed to endorse her college studies in early childhood development in that she realized she could better help her children and relatives. To help her own children, she began volunteering in her children's grade school, and discovered she had talent and an interest in teaching not only her own children but others as well. "That's when it finally hit me, you know, I could do a better service to my children to try to become a teacher–not only to my children but my nieces, my nephews, other family members."

Many of the participants, usually women or those from a minority background described what college meant to them in very personal and emotional ways; several felt that through their college degree they were in some way justifying the struggles or fulfilling the hopes of their forefathers. Nicolas, who had managed to keep taking courses, one at time, since he first enlisted, spoke of his grandfather, back in Puerto Rico, and the value he had placed on education:

> A man can take everything and anything away from you, your life, your kids, your house, your car, your clothes, everything, but one thing he can never take away from you is your education because it's in your mind, it's in your head. Remember that. I carry that with me until this day.

Luisa also put her education in the context of her family history, and culture, and spoke of her education as a way to create a better life for her children, one far different from that of her ancestors. She revealed, "My grandparents came from Mexico, we'd go to the field and pick oranges–no one from my aunts and uncles had ever stepped foot in a college."

Melissa also spoke of the struggles of her parents, and articulated what she hoped would be a better life for her children, a life in which her education would play a central part:

> I think a lot of it, I look back on my family and my husband's family and neither of his parents has a degree. My husband's family is in the same situation. Neither of them has retirement. They aren't able to help out their kids. They struggle a lot. I didn't want that. I want to be able to retire and I want to be able to leave my kids something, I want to be able to put them through school.

Other participants seemed to be most influenced to study by intrinsic motivation or an inherent interest or satisfaction in the activity itself. These participants discovered, through their adult experiences, a field that they enjoyed, something they loved to study. Lila noticed how much she enjoyed, and was good at, helping children grow and learn, and had realized that she could do this more effectively with a college degree. Haley had worked through private issues by herself, and came out with a new-found passion:

> So now that I have a 93 on my PT [physical fitness] test and a clean house, now I can move forward…I realized I could do anything. I really started getting interested in psychology and now I have a desire to finish my AA and apply the credits for a degree in psychology…and help other people who might be struggling with these things.

Martin as well had discovered a passion and excitement in studying criminal justice, and related, "I'm really interested, when I finish my time in Italy, I want to go to

law school… I've been taking a lot of CJ [criminal justice] classes and all the law classes I really enjoy. That's my dream."

And finally, nearly all participants revealed, at some point in their interview, that as they struggled to find time to work on college they realized that college was something they were doing "for me." This was also especially true for the men in the group who were African-American or of Hispanic ethnicity. For instance Hector revealed that when he was taking several courses at once, and was active in his career, and had no time to visit his parents, he felt a "little bit greedy." Walter said he had completed his degree "…just for me, just so that I can feel good about myself. Just to better you."

Sense of identity.

For some participants in the study, their sense of identity, of who they were and who they wanted to become, was involved in their decision to re-enroll. They looked at themselves objectively, and realized that the role they were filling was not the one they wanted for themselves, and they saw education as a way to bring about change. Lauren said, "I need my education. I just wasn't happy, and I decided I need to go back to school. I'm not going to be the typical Army wife that just sits at home and does nothing, eats bonbons all day and watches the kids."

Theme five until now, has addressed participants' views on ways that they had changed since high school, continued to a discussion of possible societal factors of the military lifestyle that may have had an influence on their willingness to enroll in college, and concluded with findings from the interviews on participants' stated motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, for wanting a college degree. The

following addresses those people or events they believed to be the final catalysts in their decisions.

Significant Events and People

When asked about the most significant event in their college journey, the participants' responses usually came quickly and spontaneously, and the events they recalled were often described in affective terms. Their responses on what finally ignited them ranged from the revelation that they could actually do college work to a recollection of the people who inspired them and the optimism they felt when they discovered that they would earn college credits from their previous work experience and were already on their way.

One of the events voiced repeatedly was the realization that they were college material. Nicholas remembered vividly, "I would say that very first college course in 1997. I was very intimidated…and when I took the course with the instructor, the fear of just hearing the word college, or university, just kind of went away…" William explained, "Just getting started. Just getting started, I had no idea about college. I never planned to go off to school, but sitting in that first class, I forget what it was, I thought, wow, this is a college class, you know!"

For several of the participants, it was a person they were close to who inspired them. For some it was a spouse who was working on college. Walter, for instance, whose wife was finishing a degree, realized that she would bear the financial burden for the family once his military career ended if he didn't get busy.

Another significant event mentioned by many of the participants was the realization that, when they first inquired about signing up for a degree plan, they

were further along in their college degree than they knew. The satisfaction of discovering that the college they wanted to attend respected their work experience sufficiently to award them college credit, and the emotional boost of knowing they were closer to a college degree than they had thought, were important events. Luisa was working in a child development center and completing the mandatory training modules and then decided to find out about taking college courses. When she went to the Education Center and told the counselors about the training modules she had completed, she was told that they counted toward college credit, "so I earned nine college credits sitting at home and doing modules and tests. OK… so I had my foot in the door, let's just keep going, keep going."

Theme Six: The Higher Education Experience

Theme Six presents findings on some of the significant experiences these adult students recalled concerning their actual interactions with the institution they had chosen. They first chose a program of study, in either a vocational technical degree or in a liberal arts degree, an associate of general studies; some of their reasons for their choices are included in the first part of this section. The section continues with an exploration of the classroom experiences that were most significant to them, followed by what they revealed about the kinds of learning they enjoyed the most. It then turns to participants' observations on significant instructors' attitudes towards them. The section concludes with ways in which their instructors had served as role models as they thought about their own futures. Theme six addresses the following: 1) reasons participants chose the field of study they chose, 2) classroom experiences, 3) importance of relevance of classroom

learning, 4) memorable instructors, 5) importance of being treated as adults, and 6) qualities of significant instructors.

Deciding What to Study

Adult students who have little experience with college often choose a program that is most readily available (Grubb, 1999). This was true of the participants in this study as well, as the following section reveals. Military service members have a limited number of choices when they decide to enroll in college, especially if they prefer to take classroom classes. In the case of these students, there were two possibilities, vocational technical programs, with many of the courses offered on base in the classroom, or a general studies program, pursued for the most part through online courses.

For those who had earned, or were close to earning, an associate in general studies, the reasons had been quite practical. The three participants who pursued a general studies program knew that they could gain the maximum number of college credits from their military training with this degree. As William explained, "The military gives you a lot of your electives, [from] your training, then you take your basic courses, your math, English, science, history, whatever." Two of these students, William and Walter, had taken their first courses in the classroom, and lost their fear of taking college courses in this way. When online courses became available for them, they began with this delivery system. They also took classroom classes when they were offered on base. However military bases are limited in the kinds and numbers of classes that are offered in the classroom, so these students' degrees were largely composed of online classes. Many of the participants

mentioned difficulties with the technology of distance learning, and the lack of interaction with other students. However several mentioned the advantage, when they discovered them, of this method of delivery. Distance education was something they could usually fit around even the busiest schedule, as long as they were willing to give up some of their free time. Leandra was able to take courses while at a deployed site, and recalled, "During the day I had my day job, coordinating flights and transportation, and at night, when other people were at the MWR [Morale, Welfare and Recreation] tent…I was sitting there like type type type type, taking online courses..." Military service members did not always have the time or opportunity to take even online courses, however. Tom, a military policeman, had enrolled in an online course and was sent unexpectedly on TDY (temporary tour of duty) where he had no access to the internet for several weeks; he found himself completing an eight-week course in one week when he finally returned home. The participants also related stories of deployments to Iraq, where internet was not available, or of the days when there was no internet in the barracks, so online courses were not an option for them.

Most of the participants in this study, however, received or are soon to receive an associate's degree in a vocational technical program that was offered largely via classroom classes on base. In several cases the vocational technical programs were well suited to the participants' interests and needs, as this section will explore, but in others, the participants seemed to have chosen their course of study based on what was available, in a classroom setting, when they had the time and energy to concentrate on finishing a degree. Charlotte had raised children and

followed her husband around the country during his military career. Although she had wanted to study nursing, they did not settle down long enough for her to make a start on her studies. When she was ready, during an extended stay in Germany, with her children growing up and time on her hands due to her husband's deployments, she found that a criminal justice program was offered, with face-to-face classes and she enrolled. Lee had been working on a degree in marketing; however, while he was deployed he had the opportunity to take a series of classroom classes in Hospitality Management, and recalled "I didn't know much about hospitality management …but of course, later in life a degree in hospitality management wouldn't hurt me."

For some of the participants, the vocational technical classes and degree were, at first, a way for them to get their feet wet in higher education. However, they later discovered that these did not relate to what they would eventually like to become. Lauren, after working as a home childcare provider, learned that the college at the Education Center offered the Early Childhood program, and although she was sure she didn't want to work with little children, she was ready to start college again. She planned on eventually getting a bachelor's and working with older children, but for now, "I'm just trying to get my feet wet, I think." Similarly, William had lost his fear of college with classroom classes in Criminal Justice, but changed his degree plan due to later experiences:

> I got thinking, after I was deployed for the first time in 2003, people shooting at you (laughs), you know I'm not going to risk my life for 20 years for my country and then get out and get shot at by drug dealers. Right now

> I'm just going to get an associate's degree in general studies and then I'll move on to a bachelor's degree [in history]."

Tom changed his major several times, depending on what classes were available, and on his reenlistments and chances for a job after the military. His plans for the future had changed since he started his original criminal justice degree plan, but he was finishing it up and planned to go on to finish his bachelor's in something different, and said of his degree, "I really enjoy criminal justice classes–it's too bad I'm not looking to be a cop when I get out of the Army."

In summary, the participants started with a program of study that was available at the time when they were ready, and that was the most convenient and comfortable for them, either through classroom classes or online classes. Many of the students in the vocational technical programs, who had begun in classroom classes on base, seemed to have chosen the programs not because this was what they knew they wanted to do, but to learn about college and "get their feet wet." The vocational technical degree had become a springboard to further study in a different field.

Classroom Experiences

As mentioned above, some of the participants preferred classroom classes. The reasons most often given were the fact that they enjoyed interaction with other students and with instructors, appreciated finding out about instructors' careers, and valued being able give an opinion or hear others' opinions, or ask questions when they wanted the answer right away. William reflected, "I'm really a fan of in class, getting that relationship with the instructor, other students, getting to hear their

words right out of their mouth and not somebody sitting there thinking they have to type perfect grammar in a message." The classroom experience was important to all the early childhood students. These women all mentioned that they valued interaction with other students, and encouragement and support of the instructors. Bella related a typical experience, *"*And that made me feel like wow she's got this degree and she liked my paper, she liked my ideas and that makes me feel good. I feel like I can do more, and I have more confidence."

Others really preferred the online format; Leandra, for instance, who did not like to sit in a classroom, appreciated the fact that online programs offered a wide variety of courses she could take. Several revealed how important it was to them that, after a long day at work, they did not have to go back to the Ed Center evenings or on weekend for classroom classes, but could stay up late, when the family was in bed or friends were out partying, and study.

Relevant Subjects were Important

Another matter that many of the participants mentioned was the importance, to them, that their classes had meaning for their everyday lives. They were adults, and fully involved in challenging work and family environments. They had learned much jthrough their own experiences, and had developed skills and knowledge in both career and family matters, and seemed to deeply appreciate being able to apply what they knew in formal learning situations. The participants also had some idea of what they wanted to become some day, and valued learning material that they perceived would some day be of utilitarian value to them. Nicholas, who was a military policeman, took an online criminal justice course that meant so much to

him that he would still like to meet the instructor. The instructor had given a final exam that allowed him to think like the professional police officer he wanted to become; he was asked to describe what he would do upon arriving at a crime scene, and Nicholas remembered, "I actually started putting down everything I'd learned. Go outside, look at weather factors, footprints can be damaged if it rains, and the evidence, you start from the outside in….I went ballistic."

These working adults also appreciated the opportunity to gain insights and skills that would help them master challenges and hurdles they had already encountered. Ed valued being able to relate what he learned in business management to his workplace, and realized now why the supervisors he had were often not effective:

> I could sit and read the book and read about this scenario and I'd think I know this guy, and I know this guy too, this is him, shooting from the hip, get all the bad guys. They didn't know anything about people.

Martin expressed a sentiment several of the participants shared, a realization of why high school or early college had not been important to them. He related, "When you're younger, when you go to college right after high school, you take courses that don't relate to your life. They're not part of the world." Those in child development also appreciated the immediacy and relevance of learning more about their subject, both for their work with children and for their ability to raise their own children. Luisa expressed the importance, to her, of being able to relate her studies to what was most important to her, her family and recalled, "If I read something and

I think it's interesting, I tell my husband, you've got to read this. Maybe you'll understand this is why your son acts this way."

Importance of being Treated as Adults

Several participants also mentioned, with appreciations, those times when their opinions were respected in class. They seemed to value the fact that they were no longer simply fed new knowledge, as they had been as children or young adults, but were allowed to express their opinions and bring in knowledge they had gained through hard-won experience. Lauren enjoyed her classes in early childhood development because,

> …in general ed. [academic core classes] it's 'This is what we're learning, this is how it is, no ifs ands or buts, no questions,' and here, in the courses I have now, it's, 'That's interesting, why do you question it?' And if they don't have an answer it's 'I'm not sure, let's find out.' They're making me use my brain instead of just lecturing it to me and saying, 'No, this is how it is and how it's going to be.'

Qualities of Significant Instructors

Memorable instructors had not only related to the participants as adults, and respected their real life experiences; they also served, in many cases, as role models, who, through their own experiences and education, gave their students ideas about what they themselves might one day become, and encouraged them to go further that they had originally planned. Martin, who had known he loved sociology but had not known what he wanted to do, had studied criminal justice in the classroom. He remembered an instructor:

> He's had many different jobs in CJ [criminal justice], also a law degree. I knew I liked law, but that's when I got interested in wanting to go to law school…He put the idea in my head. He's shown me how you can apply learning about the law. Listening to him talk about his career changed me.

Charlotte had chosen criminal justice as well, as nursing studies were not available. Her instructor, through his encouragement and suggestions for careers she might go into instead of nursing, motivated her to want to go on to a degree in psychology, and a career counseling juveniles:

> I love him, he's done so much, when I'm his age I want to be able to have had this life that exciting and great. I don't want to be 80 years old thinking, all I did was work. He even said, 'After you've been out in the law enforcement field for a few years you can teach online if you want.' I never thought about that!

For most of the participants, whether the classes were online or classroom classes, those that they could relate to their lives or jobs or interests, and those in which they were treated like adults with opinions and ideas that counted, were mentioned as memorable. They also were often inspired by the personal stories and encouragement of their instructors to try to become more like them.

However, as became clear in all the interviews, the participants had setbacks, disappointments, difficult times, and long nights alone in front of the computer. Theme Seven follows, with some of the findings about how they dealt with these challenges.

Theme Seven: Facing the Challenges of College, Career and Family

All participants had different strategies they employed to get through the challenges they faced while actively pursuing a college degree. Courses were often difficult, instructors were not understanding of their situations, the participants found that they really did not have the time to take the courses they wanted to, or they felt college was taking too much time away from their family life. Still, they found ways to cope. The following presents several recurring themes: 1) getting the family involved and not letting the family suffer, 2) maintaining the iron discipline needed to take classes around military duties, 3) becoming ambitious about doing well, and 4) learning to recover quickly from academic setbacks.

Getting the Family Involved

Adults bring their own valuable experiences in work and family life to the classroom; and, for these participants, their lives outside the classroom were their real lives; they needed a way to fit college around what was most fundamental to them, their families. Brigita, a recent immigrant and computer expert, found online courses a perfect way to go to college. Her self-discipline and long hours spent at the computer finally convinced Ed, her husband, to start his degree as well:

> Every weekend, instead of going somewhere, we sit at home and make our lessons. It wasn't nice at first. I'm sitting and studying. And he's sitting by his computer leaning on his arm. And I was like, 'Are you bored? Read something, watch a movie, iron, clean (laughs).' He's like, 'Hmh, it's better for me to study.'

Nicolas, and many of the others, made a positive experience out of the necessary evil of nightly college coursework, and started studying with his children, and remembered fondly, "We've made it into a family mold, we all do homework, we all have different chairs, and we all check each other's homework. It's become a part of the family, and it's really great."

Another recurring theme of most of the participants was not wanting to let their time spent on college interfere with their family life. The participants, men and women, were willing to sacrifice their own comfort to make sure family life continued to function the way it should. There was a general indication, in participants' recollections, that college was something they were doing for themselves, and that this slightly selfish activity should not have a negative effect on those they cared most about. Luisa had two teenagers, and related, "By the time I finish homework with them it's 2100, 2130 in the evening, then I've gotta start my homework, so I'm not going to bed until 0100-0200 to get up at 0530 to start the day again." When they managed to be not only a good parent, but also a good employee and a good student, they felt a great sense of satisfaction Antonio would go to great lengths to get his work done, and not disturb his family and revealed, "I just go in a closet, if there's a video I have to do, I go in the closet so the kids don't wake up, and sit there all night until I get it right. It doesn't affect them."

Iron Discipline

The discipline they had learned during military service served them well as they struggled to take college courses and still perform their work duties. For most of the active duty military students, at least some of their college was completed

while they were in a deployed area. The military may encourage voluntary education, but makes it clear, throughout a soldier's career, that mission comes first. This is all the more true when service members deploy to a combat area. As the participants related, there they are expected to work seven days a week, and evenings if their work is considered mission important. Some times they work shifts that can be as long as twelve hours, for days in a row, and going out on an unexpected mission is a common occurrence. Walter recalls in detail the iron self-discipline needed when a deployed active duty military member takes college:

> In Bagram, in Afghanistan…I'd work all day long, and then coming in at night, I would just go back up to the office and start on classes…I'd work until 2, 3 in the morning, then get back up, do PT and I would take breaks here and there, take a little nap, and then do the routine all over again.

Those taking courses in a vocational technical program who wanted to take classroom classes also had to plan carefully. James recalled taking classes at bases that were an hour or so away, driving to class in the evenings in the snow, and taking two weekend classes consecutively, in order to finish his degree.

Often the active duty participants were forced to drop courses because of unforeseen special duties, or in Tom's case, do all the coursework for an 8-week online class in one week. The participants often overcame incredible hurdles to complete courses. Walter remembered going right to class from his tank, in his tank outfit, with his homework a little dirty and wrinkled. James recalled being driven to the Education Center at his base in Bosnia to take a test during his guard duty shift.

Growing Ambition and Ability to Recover from Setbacks

In addition, many of the participants who, as discussed earlier, were generally not interested in good grades in high school, had, since their most recent enrollments, become more academically ambitious. Once they realized they could perform at a college level they wanted to do well. As Bella said, "Taking courses has been a little tough on me, I think your brain slows down as you get older, for me it did. I fight really hard to get A's because I don't want to waste my time getting anything less than that."

However there were setbacks but, as the participants recalled, they might have been disappointed, but they did not let bad grades de-motivate them for long. They had had the experience of doing well in classes already, had very strong motivations to continue, knew that they were capable of good work in some directions, and seemed to have become more realistic about areas they were weaker in. They had learned to take a bad grade not as a sign that they were bad students in general, or as something that could throw them off their path to a degree, but rather as a small hurdle that they now had the tools to overcome. Nicholas took his required math course online, and failed it. He recalled "But that's OK, I accepted the two hour frustration and then I changed my mind, and decided I can either stay down or I can bounce back and see how I can get it again. Bella had also learned to take academic disappointment less seriously:

> I got one B and I thought I didn't deserve it, but you know, the teacher did. I did my hardest work on that one. I would stay up on week nights and

weekends. Still I only got a B, but she was the teacher and that's the way it is.

The participants, once they had become motivated to finish their college degree, managed to find the time, managed to find ways to involve their families in their studying, found ways to continue to successfully fulfill their roles as parents, empoyees and service members, and learned to take academic setbacks without losing their drive. College also profoundly changed the way many of the participants thought about themselves, their future, and the importance of higher education. Theme Eight will explore the ways in which college may have changed these participants and their outlook on life.

Theme Eight: The Aftermath: How They May Have Changed

Most of the participants revealed that, now that they had a degree, they perceived a greater ability to influence their future, either in the military or afterwards. In addition, most participants noted a more general sense of empowerment, and many revealed more profound changes in the way they saw themselves and the world. This seemed to be not only the result of what they had learned in college courses, but was to a great extent the result of knowing they could accomplish something difficult, something highly respected in their environment, something they might have been afraid of, and many like themselves still feared, but something of profound importance to them, a college education. Theme Eight addresses the following: 1) practical ways they felt they had changed, 2) personal ways they felt they had changed, 3) their plans for the future, and how these may have changed since their most recent enrollment.

Practical Ways They May Have Changed

. Many of the participants, and especially the active duty participants, felt that one of the major ways they had changed was in their ability to get ahead in life. Even the most successful career as a military service member would last no longer than twenty-two years; most of them would be, at the latest, in their early '40's when they retired, and the pension they would receive from the military would not be enough to support them and their families in the way in which they were used to. They all knew of good soldiers who had "gotten out" without any college education and had not been able to get a job in the civilian world with responsibilities or pay comparable to what had had while in the service, or had gone back to the life they had before they entered the military. Walter echoed the comments of many:

> I know I can get that job that will be OK. My plan for the future is to have the opportunity to get that job that I want, without having to settle for what someone is going to GIVE me, or let me have. I can just go take what I want.

Another change many of the participants mentioned was the additional respect they enjoyed, from their supervisors or subordinates, now that they were college educated. This seemed to offer great satisfaction, especially to the male participants. William remarked, "Officers really feel that they're above, but when you can sit there and use their same language, you're the same person."

Many of those who were active duty mentioned that their attitudes towards their subordinates had changed; they were more willing to encourage those in their command to take college, and to allow them time to work on courses or take tests.

William recalled, “Those under me, my subordinates, actually look up to me and I’ve motivated them.”

Another important way they had developed was that they had learned about maneuvering effectively through college programs and requirements. As has been noted, they started their college careers with little knowledge of the process. They learned how to take colleges classes successfully. But, just as important they also learned how to maneuver themselves through the practical details of getting through a degree plan. The following discusses some of these strategies they learned, from actively seeking out classes they needed, to maneuvering around complicated enrollment processes, effectively gaining credits to complete a program, changing majors when necessary, “testing out” of courses with nationally recognized testing services, and successfully transferring their credits or degrees to other institutions.

They learned not to wait for the classes they needed to come to them, but to take an active role in seeking them out. James, when he was ready to really work on college courses, remembered, “So by the time I was done, I attacked all the little pamphlets to see what classes each school is giving next term at the bases within commuting distance.” And they had learned to figure out how to take advantage of the courses available to get to that degree as efficiently as possible, even though it meant changing degree plans for a while. Lee, who had gotten interested in a degree in hospitality management while he was in Afghanistan, found that the base in Germany where he was next stationed didn’t offer the program, so he changed his degree plan to general studies because he knew that in this way he could work on the academic credits he would need for the hospitality degree. When the hospitality

program started up again, he had finished most of his academic courses and, "I jumped back on it… So for over the past year I've been taking classes in hospitality management." The participants had also learned important skills such as mastering complicated enrollment processes and the monitoring of their academic progress online. Leandra had resisted suggestions she take college for many years, but once she did, she discovered she could maneuver around the Army's online enrollment and degree plan progression tracking system, a very important skill for military services members using tuition assistance. She went even further, and convinced all the others in her unit to enroll, and laughed as she remembered, "It got to the point where I was the only one who knew how to set up a GoArmyEd account. My first sergeant was like, 'You're the education liaison. How ironic, who would have thought it?'"

Many who had been good students in high school realized they could save time and money taking nationally recognized tests for college credit. As discussed in the literature, all of the colleges who are eligible to receive military tuition assistance are required to grant college credit for courses that students can test out of with nationally recognized testing services, for instance CLEP (College Level Examination Program). If students have a good background in a subject, for instance English or small business management, they can first brush up on the subject with a study guide and then take a college equivalent final exam. If they pass, they have earned as many college credits as they would have if they had sat in class for a semester. For good students, this was a way to save tuition money and avoid sitting in a classroom hearing material they already knew. Brigita, who had had a solid

education in a different country, explained, “I want to clean up all the courses I can with DANTES and CLEP. There is no need to waste money if you can go another way.”

They had also learned about transferring to a new institution for their bachelor’s degree. The participants talked about transferrable credits, about which four year institutions would take their associate’s degree and apply it most fully to a bachelor’s degree, what courses they would need to take in their major program at university and which ones they had already completed–these are all important details that an ongoing college student must learn to deal with to efficiently finish a degree. In addition, they had learned some important criteria for choosing the institution they would next attend. Melissa, for example, was looking for an online program to complete a bachelor’s in child development and had learned, through talking to her instructors in class and advisors at the education center, to look for regionally accredited programs.

Personal Ways They May Have Changed

Although many of the participants realized that college had brought about practical changes in their lives, many also noticed more profound changes in how they thought about themselves. This was especially true for the minority students. For the white students, their stories seemed to evoke a feeling of entitlement to a college degree, and often involved the telling of how they had managed to work the system to use the TA they were entitled to while still accomplishing what their military duties required of them. Those who were African-American, and especially those of Hispanic ethnic background seemed to have felt a more profound change in

how they viewed themselves. Their feelings included increased self-respect, an increased desire to learn, and rising aspirations for their own children. Especially for those of minority status, one of the recurring findings was an increased pride in themselves. A college education, in their families of origin, was something nearly unobtainable, especially for a man who was responsible for supporting a family. Nicholas revealed how education served both him and his family:

> Looking back, you feel a sense, as a man, you always want the best, but if I can sneak a little away for myself, be a little selfish on the side, but still maintain the accountability of taking care of the family and doing what I need to, there's a sense of accomplishment also. At the same time I'm also satisfying my own yearns and wants and an education.

Many had discovered a newfound desire to learn more. College seemed to have awakened a thirst for more learning, and a taste for doing the hard work as well. As Walter described, "I was this person who always just wanted to party or whatever, just be content with where I am. I want more now. It gives me a headache but give it to me anyway, I just want to take it, might as well take it (laughs.)." Lee and his wife have both been working on degrees, and, he says, "…she's doing it, I'm doing it, and no one's trying to fan out the flames–we're just pouring more fuel on that fire, keep on burning, it's been a wonderful experience. I've self ignited."

Most of the participants had also realized they now had different expectations for their own children's higher education experience. The participants, when they mentioned their children, all talked about the importance, to them, that their children go to college in a more traditional way than they themselves had.

Nicholas, who had become a father and breadwinner before he finished high school, reflected that he would tell his children when they were older that, "I want you to get your degree, go to college get your degree, it doesn't matter what it's in, but get it over with first, then go get yourself a job, settle down, then start a family." William noted a difference between his parents' attitude toward higher education, and his own, and remarked, "My parents, said, 'You want to work a blue collar job, good luck.' I wouldn't have that attitude with my son." And, for several, their college attendance seemed to have a positive effect on their children's relationship to higher education already, as Luisa highlights:

> …my daughter…last year she was in the 6th grade, we caught her online applying to the U. of Texas…She said, 'Mommy, I see you in college, I've got to do it now because it will be late in the game. I don't want to be 43 years old and a student.'

Plans for the Future and How These Have Changed

The following explores the rising aspirations for all the participants in regard to their academic careers. Although many of the participants noted that, when they began, they were only concerned with obtaining an associate's degree, all of them had decided they wanted to go on to a bachelor's degree, and most of them knew, fairly concretely, in what they would major. For many of them it would be in a different field from the one in which they earned their associate's degree. William, whose degree was in criminal justice, had discovered a love of teaching, and history, and his comment on what he would like to instill in his future students might possibly reflect what he had learned in his college courses:

> My future plans are to be an educator, finish my military career and then doing either Troops to Teachers or just getting certified to teach somewhere or doing high school ROTC, that would be my contribution still to the country, molding young minds on the military aspect of why we need a military, not just to go off and fight wars, but to deter war.

Melissa also had noticed a change in her goals; she was aiming higher than she planned when she first started college, and wanted to go as far as possible because she loved learning more about how children develop, and noted, "When I first started college I honestly just planned on getting my associate's, but I've become so interested…it's not actually for career goals, it's more for personal knowledge…I decided I want to go for my masters." Antonio's academic goals had also risen as he considered his future career in criminal justice. He had planned on pursuing only a bachelor's degree:

> However, recently I've been considering after I get my bachelor's to pursue a Master's, …now that I'm close to completing my associate's; now furthering my education comes to mind. Before it was always, get my associate's, get my bachelor's, get it over and done with. That's changed.

Most of the participants not only had higher ambitions than an associate's degree, but were already working on a bachelor's degree or had concrete plans for what college they wanted to transfer to in order to earn a bachelor's degree, and, as noted, had figured out the best ways to do this. Charlotte's husband was due to retire, and, with her degree in criminal justice, she was planning how best to go on to her bachelor's degree in psychology after they had moved:

> I thought of doing an online program, but Texas A & M has a campus right there. I may not work full time. The town that we're going to live in is small, so I may be able to get on with the police department as a secretary or dispatcher, at least get my foot in the door in law enforcement somehow. I'll carry a notebook around and write everything down.

Hector was planning to combine his AA degree in automotive mechanic with a bachelor's in business management, and related, "I already have some credits [toward it], computer, government, maybe some electives from Army training. Something is better than nothing. And if I don't have my own business, I can work for a company, a big company, in a management position."

In Lee's terms, these participants had "self-ignited." The desire to learn had increased for many of them, and their plans for the future had gotten more ambitious. They were confident of their abilities to succeed in college, they had developed skills to maneuver around college programs and requirements and their expectations of what they could become had expanded.

The participants had found the motivation, developed the necessary skills, and done the hard work by themselves. However, there is one more aspect of their journey to a degree that was touched on in most of the interviews, and that concerns how the Voluntary Education system may have helped or hindered their progress. In Theme Four several aspects of the military environment were mentioned that may have had an effect on how these participants changed and matured and became ready to take college seriously. They included the rising socioeconomic levels they had attained, the fact that training in the military is required and continuous, and the

positive influence that leadership opportunities may have had on them. Theme Nine explores participants' more concrete experiences with the practices and institutions that the Voluntary Education system has in place for active duty military service members, their families and DoD contractors, and how these may have helped or hindered their progress.

Theme Nine: Taking College Courses in a Military Environment

Most of the participants, whether active duty military or a spouse, mentioned the hurdles the military life placed in their way; the deployments, shift duties, duty moves, lack of college programs they needed at the sites where they were stationed, supervisors who were not understanding of the importance of showing up for class or an exam. However, most of the participants also mentioned some advantages the enjoyed that were unique to the military's Voluntary Education program. These topics are addressed as follows: 1) encouragement provided directly through supervisors, 2) special programs in the military to help service members advance on their degree, 3) mandatory degree plans, 4) accessible, helpful advisors, 5) waiver of proficiency exams, 6) instructors familiar with their lives, 7) having to pay for courses not successfully completed and, finally, 8) reasons they felt it important to work on college while still active duty.

All of the participants who were active duty military or their spouses, when asked how the military had helped or hindered their progression to a college degree, had both positive and negative things to say. The negative aspects have already been discussed. However, most participants agreed that there is much support in the military for higher education, for those who are willing and able to participate.

Several of the participants pointed out that the environment had changed for the better since they first enlisted. Bret remembered a time in the 1990's:

> I'd signed up for four classes and I only got to finish two of them because they kept sending us out to the field, and the commander will sign those, they've gotten better now, but back then they would sign the forms saying that you could go to school but then they would send you out, screw up your time, make you go, that was with classroom classes, so you had to be there.

He explained the Army's culture as he had experienced it then: "When I first came in the Army it was a dumb high school jock kind of culture. 'Oh you want to go to college, why would you want to do that?' Officers went to college" Most of the active duty service members had a similar story to tell if they had been in the military since the 1990's. However, more recent experiences had been more positive. Many of the service members mentioned their chain of command, or direct supervisor, who had allowed them time off to take an exam or to visit the Education Center or do homework. William, now a senior NCO, described how he would help those he supervised:

> …if one of my soldiers enrolled in college, then some time between duty hours of 0900-1700 I should give him at least an hour or two, depending on what's going on, to say, 'You've got your studying to do, go do it, go to the library.' He should have some time. If that guy is working hard, and I see that's he's progressing in his degree plan and he's motivated to do it.

All pointed out that this kind of encouragement was not the rule, however, and the amount of support they might be given depended entirely on the individuals involved.

In addition to those supervisors who had encouraged them, and a general change, for the better, in the military's support for higher education for active duty service members, several of the participants mentioned the opportunities they were offered to take college full time while active duty. These are often tied to service members' willingness to re-enlist, and allowed the participants to enroll in one or two semesters of college without military duties. Bret remembered his time as a full time student while active duty:

> You go to work in the morning for physical training and then you get out of work and you go to school all day. So I took a full load of 5 classes. You're supposed to get two semesters, not necessarily consecutive, it's not official, it's not something they can put in the paperwork so it's one of those verbal promises…I was in the middle of that first semester when September 11 happened, so I only got that one semester because of the war.

His experience was typical of several of the others. The Army had programs in place to encourage service members to complete college, but, when necessary, the military mission came first.

As discussed in the literature, in order to take college while active duty or, in the case of military spouses, to benefit from spousal financial aid programs, the participants had to have a degree plan, and the courses they took had to be part of that degree plan or degree plans. As Mia pointed out, "The Army–everything is

mapped out, you know what you need to do in every situation." These degree plans are recorded, and followed the participants no matter where they were stationed. To sign up for a degree plan, they visited the education center at the base where they were stationed. There they were advised, by government education service providers, about what accredited colleges and what college programs were available in the fields they were interested in. Leandra's experience reflected this. She had gone to the Education Center when she first started college, and had signed for two degree plans, an associate in general studies from one college, and a bachelor's in history, her favorite subject, from another college. She had been enrolling in history seminars while working on her associate's degree. This was possible only because she had that degree plan in history. She remembered, "I'm also more than halfway to my bachelors because a lot of the courses I took, particularly a lot of these history seminars that I kept going to or taking online didn't fall into my AA degree, but into my major requirements."

Most of the participants mentioned, with affection, their visits to the Education Center, and the comprehensive advising and help they could expect, with any questions they might have. Martin was now stationed in Europe, but recalled, "When I was in Hawaii, I just went to the Ed Center and learned about [how to take college while active duty]. I didn't realize you could take online courses. I actually started classes at that time. I started getting into it. Then being here really helped. The Ed Center here is really good." William had the same experience. Although he was taking online courses, he could just go down to the education center with any questions he might have, and get immediate help from a college advisor: "The fact

that the classes were on line and that the education staff were always readily available, in case of any questions, really helped me out." Hector also appreciated the guidance and services provided at the education center, an institution unique to the military system: "What's different as opposed to taking classes in the States? They're very helpful, they guide us which way to take classes, which classes can help you toward a degree, and having computers [available for private use] is good."

The academic advisors, and college representatives, were realistically available all day long; military service members do not make appointments to talk Education Center professionals. They drop by the Education Center, where all educational services and classes are located, when they have time and, according to most of the participants, they could expect helpful advice and information. Most of the participants mentioned, with affection, their visits to the Education Center, and the comprehensive advising and help they could expect, with any questions they might have.

As discussed in the literature, the community college from which the participants were earning or had earned their vocational technical degrees waived the typical proficiency exams required, before matriculation is possible, by most colleges, generally in math and English. The participants had been able to go right into the vocational technical classes. Most of the participants indicated that they were going to, or had taken, the required English and math courses as their final courses. They all expressed confidence that, although they had been afraid of these, or had not liked these subjects in high school, they would manage to get through them, or had gotten through them, although they had needed extra tutoring or had to

take the course twice. This study revealed that because they were able to take the vocational technical classes first, before tackling math and English, students had developed the motivation and study skills necessary to master college level English and Math. Hector, for instance, who immigrated to the US as a teen-ager and knew his mastery of English was not good, had nevertheless been able to accomplish his automotive courses, where he had had to read textbooks and follow directions closely, as well as pass written examinations. He now felt confident he could complete college English. Brigita had started her associate's degree with a poor grasp of English grammar:

> However I got my share of minus points for my English. And I'm happy for that. I was fortunate that all those professors liked what I had to write. So usually I was just advised to brush through the grammar and send it back. They complained about my missing articles, a, an, the, in Croatian they don't exist. I try to improve all the time.

Hector's instructors in automotive courses and Brigita's instructors in management courses had been giving these students additional help in their grammar and writing as the courses progressed

In addition, many of the instructors these students mentioned, especially those in classroom classes, were familiar with and sympathetic toward their particular situation as a military service member. These instructors were part of the same community as their students, understood the real lives of their students, and thus were able to effectively relate course work to participants' own experiences. Furthermore, instructors were often officers or educated NCO's who shared the

same living conditions, and may have even worked alongside the students during the work day. Participants mentioned that the relationship between instructors and students, especially in classes taught in deployed sites, was often very relaxed, and their instructors treated them more as colleagues than as students. Tom recalled the instructors he had had during one of his deployments:

> Even though we were going out on the wire every day, that was possible, because one of the instructors was a SGT 1st Class who was in my unit, so if I was out he was out, so it worked out well. And with the other school once again one of the contractors we worked with training the Afghan national police, he lived in the hooch next to ours, so I could make it to his classes.

Further, these instructors, because they understood the participants work life, were able to give them a feeling that their real lives were important, and valuable. Back from deployment and stationed in Germany, Tom mentioned with gratitude another instructor he had, and said, "He [will] cut me slack because he knows I'm on call 24/7, and if that phone rings, I'm out the door. It happened a couple of times in his class, and he was always totally understanding."

Without exception, all participants mentioned with gratitude the fact that their college had been paid for. The spouses had had access to the military's MyCAA spousal tuition assistance program, as well as other military and federal funding and, of course, the service members had used their tuition assistance. All of the participants talked about the military's generosity in providing the funding for them to go to school, but this was always tied to a remark about how the military then made it difficult to use the funding. Bret explained, "…so I'd might as well get

the Army to pay for it while I can. It's almost like free money, but it's not free money because you have to be in the Army to get it."

James estimated that he could take courses continually if he wanted to depending on his work load, and noted that, even when the load was heavy, "…the one thing I can say is that there's always a way to fit a class in…I figure I could squeeze in one every six months or so."

However, the military expected students to complete courses successfully when using military TA; if they got below a "C" in a course or withdrew past a fixed, early deadline, they had to repay all, or most of the tuition. This was, in several cases, a real motivation to get working and finish a course with a decent grade rather than just dropping it, and might have been a factor in helping the students finally complete their degree. As Lee stated, "One of the biggest motivations for me is 'Hey, if you don't want to have to pay Uncle Sam this money you'd better open this book.'"

The final topic in Theme Nine addresses what the findings revealed about students' opinions on earning a college degree while on active duty. All those participants who were military service members or their spouses would have access to the GI Bill when they retire or leave the military, but several of them spoke about why they were getting at least their associate's degree while still in the service. These included the fact that the GI Bill would not cover unlimited educational opportunities, and that learning about how to be a student while still within the protected, familiar world of the military community gave military service members a great advantage later on.

A major reason they had decided to concentrate on their education now, despite the difficulties, was summed up by Nicholas, who realized that, as generous as the GI Bill seemed to be, "Why think I'm going to get out and let the GI Bill pay for it…It's not going to be enough, especially if you're a young man or a young woman with children, so why don't you go to school, one class at a time, that's all you need to do." Others had come to the realization that taking college courses while in the military not only got them a degree, but taught them valuable lessons they would need as they continued their education later one. James put it succinctly:

> …you have to have good study habits, you have to have a good foundation on how to attack school, you have to learn how to be a student .Especially this with [the schools here] what they're offering, it's a foundation, they have these safety nets for us…so you don't feel the full effects as if you were in a real university.

A possible disadvantage of taking courses with the colleges on base came up in a couple of interviews, when several of the participants pointed out that, because they supposed the college's goal was to encourage students, some of the courses might not be as strenuous as they could be. James recalled, "That brings me back to some other classes, maybe they're so used to, 'we don't want to promote disappointment, we want to make everyone feel good,' that's just my opinion." And indeed several of the participants remembered most vividly courses in which they really had to work. Tom said of one of his favorite criminal justice instructors: "He held you to the fire on your papers too, and that's great, because it's going pan out

later on…He believes you are in college, he will hold you to a college standard, and I appreciate that."

In summary, taking college while active duty or an active duty spouse was seen by most of the participants as a good introduction to the world of higher education, due to the fact that they were able to learn the skills and habits they would need later on as they used the GI Bill to continue their education back home. In addition, they appreciated the encouragement and support of the education center personnel and their instructors, who understood and were part of their military community.

Concluding Comments Concerning Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the journeys of adult students toward an associate degree, students who are active duty military service members, their spouses or civilian contracts working for the military on base. The findings reveal that the central phenomenon, shared by these twenty participants' journey, centered on the direction they took after high school—they had very soon taken on the traditional roles of an adult—earning a living, having children, joining the military. For most of them it was only much later that, through a favorable combination of perceived need and realistic opportunity, they were able to summon the energy and discipline to complete an associate's degree while working full time, deploying, and caring for a family. Scanlon (2008) calls the process, for adults, of deciding to go back to school self-authoring, a conscious consideration of their lives and life structures, their circumstances. These adults had come to realize that they needed to make a change in their lives and life structures and, when the need

became salient and the opportunity for continuing their studies presented itself they made time, sacrificed, lost sleep, and worked on, one course after another, until they were successful.

Their eventual decisions to enroll in college seriously, and to stay enrolled, were the result of many factors, personal and environmental; and this study found that their involvement in the military life constituted an integral part of their college journey. After enlistment the participants of this study first went about building a career or a family. As discussed in the literature, during this time they worked long hours, moved constantly and faced lengthy deployments. However, the participants revealed some evidence that the military provides an environment that also may encourages service members to pursue their college. Some of these environmental factors are subtle, and some more direct. The participants in this study were able to live without financial worries and, in the case of active duty service members, got into the habit of discipline and of learning, through military training courses. They were also extrinsically motivated by the fact that the military increasingly makes a college degree a necessity for promotion, and by the prospect of losing their comfortable standard of living once their military service ended. But there were more personal motivations that spurred them to make their decision; important among these was the revelation that they could actually do college coursework, brought on by first small successes in the classroom, and the personal validation they felt when they realized they would earn college credits for their previous work experience.

Once they had finally decided to actively pursue a college degree, they chose a degree program that was realistically accessible, and in which they felt they could succeed. Those who chose a vocational technical program often did so not because this led them to a predetermined academic goal, but in order to find out about college in a relatively supportive environment. During their college studies the self-discipline and time management skills they had learned as they matured were called for, again and again. They took pride in accomplishing courses under difficult circumstances, and in continuing to fully function in their real lives as they did so.

Despite their enrollment for practical reasons, and their concern for making college fit around their lives, their intense experiences changed them as well. They got a taste for college, for the expanding worlds college offered them on an intellectual level. Further, the journey of these adults to an associate's degree helped them to expand their views of the person they were, and what they could become. They also had a new sense that they could, through their academic accomplishments, have a more positive influence over their own lives and that of their children and subordinates.

As revealed in the participants' stories, their academic journeys to a college degree were also closely intertwined with processes and procedures established by the military Voluntary Education program. Some of these, for example accessible advisory services, structured programs of study, an integration of remedial studies in the vocational technical classroom, instructors who were part of the community and understood and respected their lives, and recognition of work experience for college credit, appear to have been able to nurture them and buoy them on to a degree.

Chapter Five

Discussions of the Findings and Implications

"The language used to talk about higher education
is important, for it not only reflects our thinking: it also contributes
to a construction of reality" (Gumport, 2001, p. 246).

The purpose of this study was, first, to enlarge our understanding of the educational experiences of adult learners who had earned their degree from a community college, and who had followed a pattern of "stepping in and stepping out" in the course of pursuing that degree. For most of the participants the journey had lasted more than ten years. In addition, the study sought to explore the experience of completing a college degree while on active duty or married to an active duty service member.

For the study purpose, the researcher contacted recent graduates, as well as students who were within three to four classes of completing a degree. The participants, with one exception, were earning their degrees with a community college that holds a Department of Defense contract to provide classroom style courses at American military bases in Europe. The researcher conducted person to person one-hour interviews with twenty individuals.

The findings of the study revealed a complex interaction of personal and environmental factors that had influenced these recent college graduates' journey to a degree. Still, there were certain common threads or patterns running through all the narratives. To begin with, they shared an initial lack of a desire, or perceived financial ability, to enroll in college right after high school. Those who had enrolled

had not seen a college degree as a salient goal, and soon left. In time, military service presented itself as a way out of small towns or low-paying jobs, and enlistment soon followed, or, in the case of some, marriage to an enlisted service member. Years went by as the participants pursued careers and raised their families. Some of the participants held tightly to the idea of themselves as students and took college courses where and when they could, but when it did not fit into their lives, they carried on with what was most important to them—establishing a career or nurturing a family, or both. Eventually, a significant experience appeared to precipitate a change in them all, and a new-found salience emerged for completing a college degree. At this point they managed to fit in time for college, often in very creative ways. They completed their degrees, most of them in an occupational program, at the expense, mainly, of sleep. They refused to let their families or their careers suffer, and, while they often felt somewhat guilty about the time and energy they put into their school work, they determined they had to do it "for me." With a newly-earned associate's degree, most of the participants admitted that, when they first began, they had wanted only the associate's; now, however, they were all full of plans for their bachelor's degree, and most had already started on that path. They had changed in many other more subtle ways, as well, not only in how they viewed themselves, and their future, but also in how they viewed the educational experience they wanted for their children.

The study had also proposed to explore the experience of these students as they progressed through the steps of gaining a college degree, while on active duty military service. A major finding concerned the considerable influence that the

military had on these participants' journey. Some of these factors centered on the overall nature of the military environment; others, on the particular procedures and practices the military has in place, many of them unique, for service members who want to take college while active duty.

Finally, the findings of Chapter Four brought out several recurring themes that were not expected; some of these supported, while others contradicted, commonly held assumptions, not only concerning nontraditional students, but also concerning military service and its relationship to higher education. This chapter refers back to the nine original questions proposed in Chapter One and addressed in Chapter Four of this study, to discuss the significance of the findings revealed by these twenty military service members, their spouses and civilians employed by the military. The following discussion will first address generally held assumptions about nontraditional students in higher education, and then compare these to the actual lived experiences of these students, their decisions not to enroll in college after high school, or their reasons for dropping out soon after the first enrollment. The section will then refer to the literature on adult participation to consider their later personal development, environmental influences on their eventual interest in participation in higher education, factors that increased their ability to pursue their degree once they had re-enrolled, and the ways that successful participation seemed to have changed them.

Adult Student Journeys

"…the better we understand and incorporate students' sense of the college experience and bring that perspective to bear on our policies, the better our programs will be."

Watford and Park, 2011

The participants in this study had, upon completion of an associate's degree, accomplished something that is virtually ignored in literature and statistics on community colleges—the ultimate completion of their college degree, albeit through a pattern that departs from that of the more traditional student. Between 22 and 57 years of age, with the majority in their 30's or 40's, they had been working on a degree, most for many years, but were now completing it. As Gumport (2001) reflects, the language we use influences the way we think about higher education, and the statistics on nontraditional students have generally led to the assumption that they are less likely to complete a degree than their younger counterparts (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey & Jenkins, 2007; Choy, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Radford & Berkner, 2010).

As the economy has faltered, state governments have been reducing funding to community colleges, unfortunately right at the time when enrollments have risen. The amount of state funding a community college receives, in a number of states, is based upon performance, or the institutions' retention and graduation rates (Bradley, 2012; Dougherty, Natow, Hare & Vega, 2010; Gonzalez, 2012). Further, in 2012 President O'Bama called for more accountability on the part of the institutions, echoing what was already a trend among policymakers, the practice of tying funding

to outcomes, retention, transfer and graduation rates (Bradley, 2012). This is done using the Federal Graduation Rate Survey which mandates a three-year graduation rate (Dougherty, Hare & Natow, 2009). In addition, the Federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, which is the industry standard source for attrition, counts only first time, full-time, degree-seeking students. In this climate of ever increasing pressure on institutions to be able to produce ever more positive student outcomes, it is often assumed that institutions have failed those students who do not finish in a timely manner, and that the students who disappear have dropped out (Adelman, 1999, 2005; Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Marti, 2007). Kinser & Deitchman (2007) observe that statistics such as the above have retained their importance because the traditional student has continued to remain the norm. However, the participants in this study had continued to take college courses, often one or two per semester when their careers or personal lives permitted, but often, for long periods of time, none at all. In the eyes of the participants in this study, their first colleges had not failed them, nor had any of the institutions they might have taken courses from since the initial enrollment. They saw themselves neither as drops outs nor stop outs. They had followed their own goals and necessities of life; as Cross observed, they had been getting on with their "situation in life at a given time" (1980. p.106), and these had not included serious attendance in college right after high school.

Their pathways to a degree were all different but all support Adelman's observation about "individuals making a series of rational choices that take advantage of opportunities offered by institutions so as both to discover true

interests and reach productive ends" (2005, p. 33). Because of the incompleteness of the picture that is presented when studies follow only one institution for short period of time, Adelman recommends that studies follow the student, and focus not on retention at an institution, which is what the national studies record, but rather on persistence, which is what the individual, over time, and at different institutions, actually does (Adelman, 2005; Braxton, 2000; Hagedorn, 2005). The literature on adult learning and development, as Brookfield (1990) observed, is usually ignored in the literature on community colleges. This is unfortunate, because when adult students' lived experiences are explored, within the context of their lives, a more nuanced and potentially useful picture of them emerges. As Watford and Park (2011) observe, it is only when their students' voices are heard that institutions such as community colleges can know how to most effectively facilitate their progress. As these participants' stories have shown, the picture of "at risk" nontraditional community college students as captured in the statistics, presents only a part of the picture of who these students are, and tends not to consider their complex and evolving life circumstances, needs and strengths.

The participants all had different histories but one thing they had in common: after high school college was not a realistic alternative for them, although most of them revealed that they had been fairly capable high school students. Most had gotten a job, or gotten married right out of high school and then needed a way to provide a secure living for themselves and a family. Darkenwald and Merriam, (1982) in their model of adult participation, emphasize the importance not only of personal characteristics, but also of the environment and background of the

individual in decisions to participate in education. Family and environmental support, in addition to personal characteristics, are deciding factors for college attendance for young adults. This was true also for the participants, for instance Lee or Luisa, who had started college but soon dropped out. They did not mention college as being too difficult for them; rather, they viewed it as something that was not tenable to them at the time. Lee was more interested, first, in partying and playing football, and when his girlfriend got pregnant, in getting a good job, and Luisa saw herself rather in the role of a housewife, a tradition in her culture. These participants' reasons to not enroll in college after high school, or to drop out after a couple of semesters, were personally or environmentally precipitated, and had little to do, in their eyes, with the institution they had attended. As Cross (1981) explains, goals, and the expectation that participation will meet them, largely determine attitudes toward formal education.

When asked about their reasons for finally becoming serious about their college education, these participants related several different motivations. Sewall (1986) had earlier examined the concept of triggering events as an important influence on adult decisions to enroll. An important life event, he observed could precipitate adults' college-going decisions, but there is no one single entry motive that acts as a catalyst. Correspondingly, these participants also related several different reasons for enrolling. For many, it was the pragmatic desire to get promoted. Others foresaw the time, in the near future, when they would retire, and needed to prepare for a second career. As Aslanian pointed out, "to know an adult's life schedule is to know an adult's learning schedule" (1980, pp. 60-61). However,

there were other motives as well. Several of the students, especially the women, were motivated by perceptions of their need to change the way they saw themselves. Both Lauren and Luisa did not like what they had become, women who depended on their husbands or on welfare for their living, and decided that college attendance could help them change. As Swain and Hammond (2011), observe, adults' motivations for returning to college are tied to their identities—what they are and what they hope to become. Still others had always wanted to attend college, but had not found the time to concentrate on completing a degree, and it was only when life circumstance, for instance a nine to five desk job or free time during a deployment, or children that were no longer little, that their re-entry became possible. Nicholas revealed that college had always been a yearning for him, even when, as a junior in high school he became a father, and he had taken courses whenever he could, even while working two jobs. He and others reflect Sewall's observation, "For most adults, the desire to attend college had been present for a long period of time, but was delayed because of one or more transitory or situational barriers' (1984, p. 196).

In conclusion, the students' voices in this study presented a more complex view of the adult as nontraditional student than the one usually found in the literature on community colleges; their narratives reflected the multifaceted and evolving lives of twenty individuals from backgrounds where college was not a salient choice for them after high school. An exploration of the trajectories of their lives within the framework of adult education literature could be seen to add a needed additional perspective to commonly held assumptions about adult students

and could provide a counterweight to the language usually used when discussing community college students.

Enlistment and the Influence of the Military on Decisions to Enroll in College

As they revealed in the interviews, these adults' lives were fundamentally influenced by their participation in the military service, and the following section discusses some of the significant findings the study revealed about their reasons for enlistment, and the influence of the military environment on their later personal development and eventual decision to re-enroll in college. Their stories reflect the importance of the recurring themes of the interaction of environmental forces and evolving personal characteristics in the participants' decisions to enlist and their interest, later on, to participate in higher education.

These participants entered military service soon after high school. Traditionally accepted reasons include a desire for "greater access to financial support, advanced education and skill development" (Elder, Wang, Spence, Adkins & Brown, 2010, p. 2). It is interesting to note that these are "growth-motivated" reasons similar to those found Boshier's (1973) model of adult participation in formal education. Moreover, studies have indicated that military enlistment has been linked to lower family income and less educated parents (Kilburn & Asch, 2003); as well as to minority status (Elder et al., 2010); Kelty; Kleykamp & Segal, 2010). Similarly, military service has been identified as a vehicle for youth to find a way out of disadvantaged backgrounds (Eighmey, 2006; Moskos & Butler, 1996). Wang, Elder and Spence (2012), in their recent study, revealed more differentiated findings that are relevant to this study. They found that young men with status inconsistency,

for example those with a "pattern of underachievement featuring cognitive ability without corresponding grades and a low family income" (p. 398) are more likely than those with a more consistent status to enlist in the military in order to fulfill their potential. A state of status inconsistency can be understood to apply to most of the active duty participants in the study. Many of them were from a minority background, most revealed a working class family background, nearly all had had to support themselves or a family member after high school, and nearly all had mentioned disliking high school; consistently remembering, however, that they could have done better but had not cared.

Wang et al. (2012) also found that young people enlisted not only to better themselves, for career and financial security and other benefits such as health care, but also for the opportunities for college, the reasons the participants in this study also revealed. Referring back to Boshier's (1973) "growth motivators" one might propose that military service was, for these individuals as for others with a similar status inconsistency, a salient alternative to enrolling in college, an option that for most of them was not viable at the time.

Military service holds additional appeal for young men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; it is seen to offer opportunities not only for self-improvement, but also for "strength, pride and camaraderie" (Wang et al., 2012, p. 399), and the chance to develop leadership skills (Eighmey, 2006). These young men were tired of learning in the classroom, but may have been ready, instead, for physical and mental challenges and tests of character. Cross' (1981) model, which can be used to explain why these students did not enroll in college after high school,

could also explain why they enlisted in the military. Apparently, they perceived that service in the military, unlike college, could fulfill their most salient goals.

Enlistment appeared also to be a known and accepted route to them and their families. Nearly all of the male participants mentioned relatives or friends of theirs who had been or were in the military. As Bret recalled, "I decided…I was joining the Army, and it's kind of a family thing, everybody joins the Army…" Darkenwald and Merriam's (1982) model of adult decisions to participate in higher education includes the importance, in these decisions, of the values and aspirations most adhered to in one's environment. This might possibly also be said of these individuals' reasons for joining the military.

These participants, like nearly 200,000 young men and women every year (Kleykamp, 2006), joined the military and were soon deeply involved in the rigors and challenges demanded of successful service members. As their individual stories revealed, it became apparent that although military service is assumed to offer the chance for a college education, the actual life of an enlisted service member, at least in the first few years, often made college attendance impossible. The deployments and constant moves, isolated bases with few classroom classes, and often inconsistent internet access all represented very real barriers to participation.

From the participants' stories however, it might be surmised that military service might have had several subtle effects on their lives that may have helped foster their later interest in higher education. Through their descriptions of their lives at the time, they revealed that their socioeconomic status had improved. They all mentioned that they were secure financially, with a comfortable standard of

living. It could be surmised that they had reached a standard of living they had not had as young adults or as children. Service in the military, despite the rigors and hardships, had given these participants a social mobility they might not have enjoyed had they not entered military service. Elder et al. (2010) point out that there has been insufficient attention paid to research on the military as a factor in social mobility: it was obvious, however, from these participants' stories that the military had indeed had a large influence on their socioeconomic status. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) in their psychosocial interaction model emphasize the importance of socioeconomic status in decisions to participate in formal education. Thus these individuals' later interest in enrolling in higher education may have been due, at least in part, to the upwardly mobile lifestyle their military service had engendered. Another environmental factor that may have increased these participants' interest in college education centers on the people with whom they interacted in their daily lives. Rubenson (1977) observed that the values of people important to one's own self-definition determine the importance, to the individual, of formal education. It was interesting to note that a majority of the service members were in a second marriage, and their new spouse was either already educated or was going to college. In addition, when the service members spoke about their friends or colleagues in the military, it was notable that these friends held ranks equivalent to their own; they were other senior enlisted service members, many of whom were also taking college courses.

Another less apparent effect their military service may have had on the active duty participants concerns the general climate of training and self-

improvement military service provides. Every service member related stories of the extensive military and leadership training he or she had done—training schools they had been sent to, or military self-improvement correspondence courses they had taken. They were familiar with taking tests, sitting in the classroom, memorizing manuals—learning. They had also been successful in these learning projects, evidenced by their having been promoted. Bandura (1986, 1997) observed that individuals' beliefs in their ability to do something affect whether they are motivated to engage in that activity. It may be suggested that through their military training they had developed a certain amount of confidence in their abilities to learn in a formal setting, an important quality for adults contemplating returning to higher education. In addition to the above-mentioned general positive influence that the military environment may have had on their later interest in a college education, the military, unlike most employers, actively encourages college learning, and most recently, a college degree, is considered a prerequisite for promotion. Brauchle came to the conclusion that "the military has adopted educational participation as an integral part of the military culture" (1998, p. 3). These participants had apparently gained strong external motivation for participating in formal education. This "learning press," or "the extent to which one's total current environment requires or encourages further learning" (p. 142) represents the second component of Darkenwald and Merriam's model (1982). The military thus, for these students, contributed to the creation of a socioeconomic climate and conveyed a value system that made college participation more viable; these and the "learning press" that

made participation a prerequisite for a successful military career each contributed to these students' decisions to enroll.

Voluntary Education Practices and Student Persistence

These participants' military service influenced them, in both their personal development and in regard to their socioeconomic status. The incremental developmental changes these brought about in the participants may have influenced their later decision to participate in higher education. However, as is true of most adults, these individuals faced many environmental barriers that placed them at some risk of successfully completing their degree once they had started. A among these were time and distance constraints, under-preparedness, lack of understanding of what courses they should take, or confusion in how to maneuver around college.

As discussed in the literature, military service members, who want to take college courses while active duty, are all required to follow certain steps, and make use of certain facilities as they progress to a degree. These are referred to as "Voluntary Education," having been established to help ensure that tuition assistance, the military's funding program for active duty service members, is spent as effectively as possible. The participants in this study all followed these requirements, and attended those colleges that, by contract, provided these services to them. All mentioned these practices as benefitting them as they completed their degree plan. As discussed later in this chapter, these practices include accessible advisory services, structured and mandatory degree plans, credit for work experience, small classes with instructors who were familiar with their lives, and, in the case of the students graduating with a degree in an occupational program, waiver

of proficiency exams in English or math, and the ensuing possible necessity of remedial classes before taking courses for college credit. The following will address some of the participants' experiences with these processes and programs, and then relate their experiences to some of the current literature on practices that may foster adult student success.

Mandatory Degree Plan

All students who wish to use military tuition assistance must establish a degree plan before they begin. The degree plan maps out what courses they need to take, and what credit they may already have. College, for these students, as for most adult students at community colleges, entailed many sacrifices, and they needed to know that their short nights and lack of family time would soon be worth the effort. Because of the structure of the mandatory degree plan, all of these students knew what they needed to take, and could estimate when they might be done with their program. Leandra, for instance, had her list of required courses tacked up next to her desk, and enjoyed being able to check off the courses as she completed them. Hector has struggled with his English; but he is finishing his degree. He observed, "Going here on base or sometimes even going all the way to [the next base, 40 minutes away]…I've been going to both colleges. Everything, according, towards my degree plan in Automotive Technology." The concept of a structured degree plan that provides students with few choices, yet presents an understandable, manageable "road map" to their goals is presently being explored in the literature (Jenkins & Cho, 2011; Karp & Hughes, 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2006). At most community colleges structured, mandatory degree plans are not required.

Instead, these institutions assume that their students have a plan and are aware of the requirements and options that are open to them. Yet, often-times students do not have the experience necessary to chart their own course (Karp & Hughes, 2008; Rosenbaum et al, 2006; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Rosenbaum et al., in their study of private occupational schools, observed that they "offer a structured program that reduces the burden of collecting information and the risk of mistakes" (2006, p. 226).

Accessible Advisors

Another aspect of Voluntary Education that was mentioned often by the participants concerned the availability of an intense, accessible advisory service. They "went down to the Ed Center" whenever they had a question about enrolling, or class availability, or when looking for a suitable online program or course, or to get help with financial aid. As Melissa said, "It is nice to go through the military community and the education office. We have these things here to help us and support us. If we didn't, we'd just be looking online for colleges and trying to get it done." At the Ed Centers they could find government educational advisors and college representatives who would help them, without an appointment, without long waiting times. Nicholas, when asked what had helped him complete his degree, replied, "The education staff were always available, in case of any questions, that really helped me out."

Although they may have an idea of what their academic goals are, many adults experience doubts and insecurity when they contemplate going back to school. The challenges of course work, and negotiating the institution may make

them doubt themselves or their ability to do college work (Brookfield, 1999; Kasworm, 2008). Accessible advisory services have been seen as a way to concretely help these new students (Karp & Hughes, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Other studies have indicated that concrete, procedural assistance has been shown to be important: step-by-step advice, when students need it, on how to go about reaching one's goals (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp & Hughes, 2008). The advisors in the Education Centers worked only with adult, working military students. The college representatives who advised them were generally military spouses who were embedded in the social life at the bases where the service members were stationed. While they were not professional academic advisors; generally holding a bachelor's degree and trained to respond to practical questions about financial aid, evaluations, and upcoming course offerings, yet, through their help and support, they appeared to provide these students with timely information and guidance. This form of social tie that also functions as an information network has been shown to be a predictor of college persistence (Karp & Hughes, 2008).

Shorter Terms and Predictable Class Schedules

The participants in this study had needed to fit their college into their busy lives, and its feasibility was important to them, given that the colleges they attended offered classes with shorter terms and predictable meeting times. Their military service seemed to move them quickly, from duty station to duty station. All had been in Europe when interviewed, but all mentioned they would be leaving soon, or had some upcoming training to attend. The active duty military service members seemed to be able to predict their ability to attend classes in terms of months only.

When their job finally permitted, and they could use all their free time to take college courses, they were happy that the courses were condensed into eight-week length, meeting six hours a week, allowing them the opportunity to finish before duty again called them away. And classes met at predicable evening hours or on weekend. The participants in this study had pointed out that they had been able to take several courses while at a deployed location, fitting several in within the short time they were able to take courses. One student recalled having had a couple of months of free time in the evenings while deployed, and added, "I started to pursue a degree in hospitality management, where I took a total of nine credit hours in a combat zone." When these students had two months of free time in the evenings, they knew they could complete a course or two in that time.

Adult students need to proceed with their degree work as efficiently as possible, and if they cannot be sure that this will be possible, they may lose motivation. Rosenbaum et al. (2006) point out that programs that have shortened semesters and predictable class schedules can increase students' motivation and their sense that they are making progress. They also observed that this practice reduced the uncertainty among students that they would be able to complete courses in the limited time available to them.

Credit for Prior Work Experience

The participants all expressed the importance of feeling valued as adults, and spoke emotionally about times when their previous life experiences and accomplishments were recognized by the institution. There were two events in particular that they mentioned; the first is the Voluntary Education's practice of

granting college credit for previous work experience. Bella remembered the motivation she felt when hearing that she had earned credit for her previous work; "After that I found out I had 12 credit hours. I thought, wow, I'm not just starting from scratch! It doesn't feel like the journey's too long then. It makes you feel good." Similarly, research has shown that adults need to feel respected and valued for what they are, and what they have accomplished in their lives prior to enrollment in college (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm & Dirkx, 2000). As already discussed, the military demands regular training and self-development of its service members. The college they were attending grants them college credit for some of their military work experience ("American Council on Education;" Kime & Anderson, 2000). William explained, "You've got all of these credits just from wearing a uniform." In addition, the participants in the group who were receiving their degree in early childhood professions were spouses, and all had worked in child development centers on base. These military-sponsored daycare centers all require in-house training for their employees, and this training also provides the students with several college credits when they matriculate in the college's early childhood program. As Rosenbaum et al. (2006) point out, motivation is not only a personal characteristic, but also a contextual matter The fact of already having college credit, of knowing that their previous work experience was valued by the institution, seemed to buoy the students and motivate them; they were not starting college from the very beginning. This process of granting college credit for college-level knowledge and skills gained outside of the classroom is generally referred to as Prior Learning Assessment in colleges and universities in the U.S. This strategy for helping adults

progress toward a degree has long been overlooked (Klein-Collins, 2009), and is not without controversy, but has been identified as another way to motivate students and help them persist to a degree as efficiently as possible.

Another finding worth noting concerned issues of transferability of credits obtained for work experience. These participants revealed that they all were aware that, when they eventually transferred to another institution, a four-year college or university, some of this credit might not be accepted. And, by the time they completed their associate's degree, they seemed to have developed the resiliency and motivation to find this possible future loss of credit only a minor hurdle. Bret, for example, had talked to a large research university where he would like to pursue a bachelor's degree, and found that "Some of the elective stuff from the Army won't transfer in, like Army training, it won't count, but I just wanted it on there for promotion points anyway…"

Waiver of Proficiency Entrance Examinations

The active duty military participants in this study who were earning a degree in an occupational program had not taken proficiency exams in English or math before being allowed to matriculate, a general practice at community colleges. They had started immediately with credit-bearing courses, although they had been out of high school for a considerable length of time, and for several English was their second language. Those individuals who have no college background, or who need to improve their reading and writing skills are found in significant numbers in community college remedial programs (Calcagno et al., 2006), so it might be assumed that remedial education, in another community college, would have been

required for some of them. The participants who were in an occupational program enjoyed small class sizes, and were required to read textbooks, take and pass written examinations, and write papers, and recalled receiving remedial help from instructors as they moved through their programs. This study revealed that because they were able to take the vocational technical classes first, before tackling formal math and English courses, they had developed the motivation and study skills necessary to master college level English and math. Hector, for instance, had completed all his requirements for a degree in automotive technology and was now confident he could complete college English. Brigita had started her associate's degree with a poor grasp of English grammar, but her online instructors would allow her to rewrite her papers to improve the grammar before giving her a grade. She had also used an online tutorial program the college offered to work on grammar lessons while she progressed to her degrees. Both these students were motivated by the fact that they were making progress in credit-bearing courses, and these positive emotions may have given them the added interest in improving their skills in areas where they were weakest. These findings affirm the current research that is part of the urgent discourse in the literature on community colleges on the remedial courses required of a majority of entering students, and their effect on student persistence (Bailey & Cho, 2010; Clayton-Scott, 2011). Due to present pressures to find ways to encourage student success and persistence in community colleges, many experts are reexamining the practice of placing students with insufficient math and English proficiencies in developmental courses, where they are required to spend one or more semesters; the results show that most students never complete these non-credit

bearing courses, and their chances of persisting to a degree are greatly reduced (Bailey & Cho, 2010; Edgecombe, 2011; Grubb, 1999; Perin, 2006). Researchers are recognizing that the affective benefit of earning college credit from the beginning can influence how much effort students will invest in a college course (Edgecombe, 2011). These researchers, and others, have called for efforts to reform typical remediation programs in order to ameliorate this "cooling down" effect they seem to have on students. Their suggestions include, among others, allowing students with minimal English and math deficiencies to work on their basic skills while simultaneously taking credit earning classes in academic programs, just as Hector and Brigita had successfully done.

The next section addresses the participants' views on ways they had evolved personally as a result of their successful college experience, and will end with some observations on the dual influences of military service and higher education as revealed by the participants.

Occupational Degrees are Only the Beginning: "I've Self-Ignited"

A significant feature of the findings included the various ways in which these participants had changed as a result of their obtaining an associate's degree. These changes were surprising as there is very little in the literature addressing them. They included a) their "warming up" and later determination to pursue additional higher education, b) their movement from being extrinsically to being intrinsically motivated to learn, c) a change in their views of the importance of higher education, d) a shift in what they perceived as their role in their community, and e) the effect of the interplay of the influences of military service and higher

education on their development. These five findings will be addressed below within the framework of adult education literature.

To begin with, these students, without exception, had, as one student observed, "self-ignited" and as a result had warmed to the idea of pursuing additional higher education, not only for the extrinsic benefits they could now appreciate, but also because they had discovered a taste for learning. Most of the students indicated that they now enjoyed learning new material and that they valued a newfound sense of empowerment as they gained new knowledge. Further, they were determined to continue on to a bachelor's degree, or were, in most cases, already pursuing one. This finding is interesting in that it contradicts much of the literature on community college students and their tendencies to transfer (e.g., Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). These researchers had found that occupational programs tend to discourage student transfer to four year institutions by providing an atmosphere that distracts from the bachelor's degree. However, the statistics concerning transfer rates of community college students to four year schools are problematic in that there has been "no valid or universal measure of successful transfer programs" (Sylvia, Song & Waters, 2010, p. 561). They are thus often inconsistent and even contradictory, for various reasons; one of these being due to the fact that an increasingly mobile student body often swirls through courses at different institutions making reliable quantitative statistics nearly impossible with the methods used now (Sylvia, et al., 2010). This qualitative study did reveal several recurring themes as far as "warming up," however, and the following will discuss some of the reasons all these participants may have expanded their academic

horizons. The participants' stories all included mention of instructors who had all encouraged them to go on with their education. They had done this in two ways. They had acted as role models and had talked about their own careers and professions. This, for many of the students, was their main way of learning about careers that might be available, and what they might become. In addition, several participants indicated that their instructors had talked about the importance of continuing on to a higher degree, and that they were sure these students were capable of pursuing more education. As Rosenbaum et al. (2006), found, in their qualitative study of students in occupational programs, warming up does occur, and it happens because of faculty members who encourage students to continue on to a bachelor's degree. Lila, Bella, and Lauren, in their early childhood program, had had instructors who urged them to go on to become school teachers and had talked to them about how they might go about this. Martin and Antonio were encouraged to aim high, to go to law school, and both indicated that they had serious plans for how they would accomplish this.

These participants highlighted, also that they had developed an intrinsic interest in what they were learning, and had begun to want to learn, not only for the degree but also for the enjoyment of the activity. This finding seems to affirm the findings of recent research that compared adult student motivations for learning and their resultant emotions and found adult students' "interest and intrinsic motivation significantly predicted positive affect" (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007, p. 141). This positive affect was apparent in several of the participants. Walter, who had hated books, but now just wanted college to "bring it on," or Bella, who observed,

"But I also extend myself by finding out more about things and one thing leads to another. I don't stop with just one thing, you want to learn more and more and more." And as noted earlier, nearly all the service members mentioned they were taking college "for me," a comment, repeated in nearly all the interviews, which would appear to signal personal commitment and intrinsic interest. There is little mention in the literature on community college students of this lived experience of warming up to the college experience, and almost none related to military service members who enroll in college. One qualitative study involving service members found noted a trajectory similar to the one revealed here; younger students reported extrinsic motivations such as the need to get promoted or preparation for a job after leaving the service. However, for those who began the educational journey, "the process itself became the motivator" (p. 23) and a movement from external to internal motivation frequently occurred among older students (Brauchle, 1998). It is interesting to remember that these military service members had enlisted for financial benefits and security, but also for more intrinsic reasons such as personal growth, character building, and leadership opportunities, to "make something of myself." As Ryan and Deci (2000) observed, intrinsic motivation involves self-authoring, and the pursuing of an activity because it is valued by the individual and fulfills a sense of personal commitment to excel. Further, intrinsic motivation is an integral part of the human tendency toward growth. It could be that their intense positive reaction to their academic experiences is a continuation of their growth trajectory begun when they first enlisted.

The third finding concerned their coming to value higher education. In this regard, the participants revealed in their own retelling of their experiences some very profound changes in themselves that might well have enduring influence on the lives of their families or community. One very important theme many of the participants revealed concerned a new respect for the traditional higher educational experience where their own children were concerned. As Nicholas, who had become a father as a junior in high school, observed, …"we want the best for our children, so I want you to get your degree, ...then go get yourself a job, settle down, then start a family." And Melissa, who had become a military wife soon after high school, explained her plans for her three children, "I want to be able to put them through school…and provide for them until they're finished." For these participants, their highly piecemeal and nontraditional college journey would have a profound effect on the support and encouragement they could offer their own children through high school and into early adult life. It has long been known that a four-year college degree has financial and personal benefits for the graduate, and recent research has also established that an associate's degree can afford considerable financial benefits (Carnevale et al., 2009; Grubb, 2002; Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski & Keinzl, 2005). Several studies have suggested that other benefits may include better personal and family health, economic well-being, benefits of less reliance on the welfare system and less involvement in crime (Belfield & Bailey, 2011; McMahon, 2009; Porter, 2002). However the findings of this study add to the scant literature about the more personal benefits that might have profound effects on the life courses of participants' children.

In addition, several students noted personal changes in how they interacted with those around them, or showed evidence of an ability to take on greater tasks in life or become more productive members of society. All of the active duty service members mentioned that they now encouraged their subordinates and friends to work on their college while they were still in the military. Charlotte had become leader of her husband's unit's family support group, largely, she surmised, because of a newfound interest and ability to focus on challenging activities. Several mentioned that their original intention was to become a policeman, but now they had a deeper interest in the theory of law. William had wanted to become a police officer, but now wanted to teach history and ROTC, and "mold young minds on the military aspect of why we need a military, not just to go off and fight wars, but to deter war." Bowen (1999) explained that higher education is supposed to influence individuals through increased cognitive development, emotional and moral development, and the ability to participate as a citizen and as a family member. These students' stories add to the scant research in the community college literature that might help substantiate Bowen's call.

The Interaction of the Military Environment and Higher Education

This section will end with one final observation on the influence of both the military and higher education, respectively, on the development of the participants. Both had influenced and changed them. They were no longer who they had been as high school seniors; but the two environments—the military and higher education—seemed to have affected them in different ways. These participants had enlisted in part to "make something of themselves," and many related that they would never fit

in again in the old neighborhood, with the old friends who hadn't had their experiences. Lee points out that when he goes home to visit, "My attitude, how I articulate myself, how I go about my business as an individual, now is set apart from the guys I grew up with and they say, man, look at Hollywood." One might wonder if it was not also military service that had brought about these profound changes in these participants. However, several mentioned veterans who had served, as they had, in the military, but had not gone to college, and instead returned to the life they had had before. They had gone back to working at Walmart, or driving truck. As Lee explained, "But some join the military and then go back to the same thing we came from." It would seem, from these participants' explanation of their military and educational experiences, that their successful military service had provided opportunities for personal growth and character development as well as environmental support; these in turn had influenced their desire and ability to attend college that, in turn had precipitated additional profound personal changes.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the journeys toward an associate's degree of adult students, students who were active duty military service members, their spouses and civilian contractors on base for the military. In the course of these one-hour interviews the twenty participants consistently addressed several themes that, upon examination, challenge widely held beliefs about adults in higher education and provide information on subjects relevant to adult educational journeys about which little is known.

To begin with, the participants' stories revealed, from the inside, the experiences of military service members and ways in which their military service and their educational journeys had intertwined. The participants' growth motivations as revealed in their reasons for enlisting in the military resemble those reasons that others, from different backgrounds or with more support, may enroll in college, for a chance to improve their economic standing, to experience the wider world, to make something of themselves and, if possible, to get a college education. As a recurring socioeconomic theme, these participants revealed that the military environment had given their lives structure and security; however, this military community also demanded self-discipline, hard work, constant training, and a subsuming of personal goals to the duties at hand, to the mission. The participants' stories revealed that this environment engendered in them an upwardly mobile outlook on life and also a new-found maturity, a growing sense of their own abilities, and an awareness of the importance of making use of the opportunities for additional personal growth that were available to them. The military environment also provided strong encouragement to participate in higher education through its policies. First, college is generally required for promotion, second, all military service members, and to a lesser extent their spouses, have access to funding for college through the Department of Defense. Similarly, Henry and Basile (1994) found that those adults most likely to participate in education have a work-related interest in further education, are given a college brochure at work, and have an employer who is willing to pay the course fee. This conception of the interaction of

military service and enrollment in higher education has not been explored in previous research.

Further, the study contributes to the urgent discussion in the literature today about practices and programs that will keep adult students in college, once they first decide to participate, and also contributes to the discussion of those institutional factors that may have fostered the participants' willingness and ability to continue to a degree. These practices, put in place by the Voluntary Education system, were recurring themes mentioned by the participants as being important to their eventual success. This study has discussed them in detail, and should contribute to the present knowledge about realistic, structured programs and practices that can foster student success at the community college level.

Finally, the study gave voice to adult students, and those nontraditional students who make up the majority of students in community colleges, whose voices are seldom heard, and whose stories revealed several themes that have not been explored in the literature. To begin with, these long-time tenacious persisters, it was revealed, fit college around their lives when possible, often taking less than one course per semester. They, and millions of others like them, follow patterns that have largely been ignored in data on college graduation rates. Federal and state funding considerations that tie funding to short term completion rates of full time, first time students do not take into consideration students such as the participants in this study, and a majority of all community college students, who depend on these institutions to be available to them when their life schedules permit them to actively pursue their education. Further, although most of the students were earning a degree

in an occupational program they all had rising aspirations for themselves academically, and most had already begun a bachelor's degree. This finding runs counter to widely held beliefs about the cooling down effect of an occupational program that maintain that these programs tend to distract students from interest in a bachelor's degree. Finally, the participants revealed changes in themselves that have been scarcely explored in the literature on community colleges. These included not only a growing sense of their own capabilities, but also a new sense of responsibility towards their environment and a strong belief in the importance of higher education for their children. These changes in individual students provide profound benefits not only for the students and their families, but also for society at large.

Implications and Recommendations

Community colleges play a significant role in the American higher education, system, enrolling in the Fall of 2006, over 6.2 million students; nearly 35% of all postsecondary students (Provosnik & Planty, 2008, p. 2). Enrollment at public 4-year colleges and universities roughly doubled from 1965 to 1999, while enrollment at public community colleges increased more than twice as much (Kasper, 2003). Community colleges provide access to higher education for those who otherwise would not be able to attend college, opening for their students the doors to the economic and health benefits higher education can provide (McClellen, 2009, Porter 2002; Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Community college student populations are highly diverse, tend to work while they go to college, and are older than traditional age students. Community colleges also offer access to those whose academic skills, including level of English language proficiency, would not qualify

them for enrollment in four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Grubb, 1999), those who need to improve their job skills, or those who need time to decide what they want to do after high school (Grubb, 1999).

The academic journeys of the adult participants of this study accorded with the literature on higher education, concerning the non-traditional pattern of their journey. For all, their journey had taken more than three years. Many had needed as many as fifteen years to complete an associate's degree. It is noteworthy that these students did not perceive that any of the institutions that they had attended had failed them; rather, they had fitted college around their lives in the best way they knew how. This finding adds a valuable insight that should be considered in the present urgent discourse on "improving" adult community college completion rates, and the strong trend to tie timely completion rates to state and federal funding, since this policy would fail to acknowledge the actuality of their degree completion.

Further, these students were all part of the active duty military community, and were, like approximately 450,000 other members of the military community, working on their degrees while on active duty, married to active duty service members, or civilians on a military base. Their college journeys were influenced by their participation in the military community in ways that have not been expored in the literature. In addition, several of the processes and programs that Voluntary Education employs, for instance mandatory and structured degree plans, an accessible and intensive advisory system that provides procedural guidance, credit for prior work experience and the integration of remedial work in English into credit bearing courses, as well as faculty who provide information about and

encouragement to students about possible future studies, seemed to help the participants complete their degrees once they were seriously enrolled, and to inspire them to expand their educational horizons beyond an associate's degree. These practices are presently being explored in the literature, as noted earlier, and this empirical research might contribute to the discussion of their effectiveness. These findings would provide additional guidance to leaders in higher education on the state and federal level, college administrators, academic advisory staff and college educators.

For College Funding Decision Makers

Community college budget cuts at state levels, combined with President Obama's call for a substantial increase in college graduates in the next few years have resulted in renewed interest in, and increased practice of, making community colleges accountable for the funding they receive, and accountable for the number of students they can successfully graduate within a certain limited number of years. The participants of this study, and many other adult students, would not be captured in the student statistics, available to funding bodies, as these normally count only first-time full time students enrolling in the fall semester. However students such as the participants in this study are dependent, for their eventual success, on realistic access to, and support from, the programs the institutions can provide. And reduced funding can result in less flexible course scheduling, reduced advisory services, narrower course offerings, larger classes—all of these would reduce opportunities for students fitting college around their lives. If community colleges are to remain the equalizing and democratizing institutions they were meant to be, they will need

to continue to offer realistic access to working adults, who comprise the majority of their students. As these study findings suggest and the literature supports, it is counterproductive to expect these adults to adhere to traditional patterns of study. As the scant literature on adult persisters and this study have shown, students do not simply drop out never to return. When they are ready, they may well continue. And the benefits of completing an associate's degree, as this study has revealed, are wide-reaching, not only for the individual but also for their families and their communities.

When budgets are being cut, changes have to be made; money has to be saved on facilities, programs and staff. This does not have to mean that the community college becomes a less accessible institution. Instead, programs and procedures can be rethought and streamlined, and old ways of doing things at community colleges can be analyzed with a view to making them more relevant and useful for the actual students who attend, whether as traditional students or in a nontraditional manner. In the wake of the current call for more accountability, some recent research has explored some of these ways community college programs might be modified to actually address the majority of their students. The programs of Voluntary Education, the umbrella under which these participants received their degree, are very similar to several of these suggestions, and the experiences of these students might offer insight into how these affect actual students. The following will offer recommendations for institutions concerning these practices.

For College Administrators

The research findings indicate that several specific practices of Voluntary Education, and of the institution that the study participants attended, which is under contract to the Department of Defense and a member of the Servicemembers Opportunity College, helped buoy and nurture these students on their way to a degree that typical community college programs might not have been able to accomplish. To begin with, these participants had realistic access to advisory services. They could drop in without an appointment to talk to college representatives and advisors. The college representatives were people like them, and with their ability to help students navigate through all aspects of the college program they created an accessible information network for the students. For community college students in general this kind of realistic access to practical help, a one-stop information center where they could get all their procedural questions answered could help reduce their general confusion and feelings of not belonging to the institution.

Secondly, these students were provided with a structured, mandatory degree plan, something that seemed to help them in that it created a concrete road-map to their degree. American education has, in the past, assumed that students have the time and funds to decide for themselves what programs interest them, and the ability to decide what courses they need. This was not true of these participants, and it may not be true of non-traditional adults, in general. This practice could offer an additional way to provide students with the motivation they need.

College credit for prior work experience is another practice of Voluntary Education that helped inspire these students to enroll and persist. They felt valued as adults with experience that the institution respected, and felt motivated because they knew they were not starting "from scratch" on their college journey. All were aware that, when they eventually transferred to another institution, a four-year college or university, some of this credit might not be accepted, but, by the time they completed their associate's degree this factor seemed to be viewed as a minor hurdle.

Another factor that seemed to increase these students' motivation concerned the policy that did not require them to take remedial courses before matriculating, but instead had had remedial work integrated into the credit earning occupational courses they took. This feature was only possible because of small class size, of course, and required experienced, dedicated instructors to provide remedial work along with regular course work. However the study provides some evidence that integrated remedial work might offer another practical way to foster student success in community colleges.

For College Educators

Participants in this study revealed two major ways in which instructors had made a real difference in their motivation and ability to persist, and provided evidence that non-traditional adult students at community colleges have needs that are truly different from traditional age students. The quality that they most respected in their instructors was an understanding of and respect for their life circumstances, for their "real lives." They also valued learning that was immediately relevant to

their jobs and family lives and that could help them improve and expand their mastery of these. Further, they were buoyed and inspired by instructors who acted as role models, providing real examples of what they themselves might become, and who urged them not to stop with the associate's degree, but to pursue their education further. The literature on adult education reveals a long and rich history of exploring and explaining the importance of these qualities in instructors of adults. Community college educators, and their students, would benefit from similar understandings.

For Adult Students

The decision to enroll in college after years away from academia is not one that adults make lightly. As adult educators have pointed out, adults face fears about their own ability to perform at the college level and maneuver around the institution's programs and policies, insecurities about their rusty skills, and doubts about their ability to juggle the double burdens of their real lives and college work. Studies such as this one, which gave an in-depth look at the lived experiences of adult students, should serve to guide and inspire adults everywhere who are considering enrolling in college.

Suggestions for Further Research

The study of these twenty adult students as they completed their associate's degree as military service members, their spouses, or civilians working on military bases, has revealed several areas for further research into community college students, and college students who are active duty military. These include benefits of involvement in college study while involved in the rigors of military life, the

interplay of the military environment and higher education on military service members' upward mobility, ways in which prior college experience might affect those veterans who enroll in college or university once they have left active duty, and a further investigation into practical processes that encourage adults to complete a degree.

It is generally accepted that the trauma of their wartime experiences has had extensive psychological effects on many of the military service members, who have served in recent wars. All of the active duty participants had served in deployed areas, most for several years; these were mentioned in the interviews, not as a time of trauma, but, once they discovered college, in the classroom or online, as a time of growth. It may prove useful to explore this phenomenon, to investigate whether involvement in the intellectual pursuit of college had any influence on the emotional health of these individuals or whether, on the other hand, the participants' apparent resilience and orientation toward growth has influenced both their psychological health and their inclination to better themselves through college.

The military is thought to provide an engine of social mobility for service members and their families, although there has been little research on the phenomenon. This study revealed that, from the participants' point of view, there might be some indication that this is true. Additional research might explore not only the effect of the military environment on service members' personal outlooks, but also the interplay of higher education and military service and the influence of these factors on socioeconomic status and personal values.

These participants had progressed to a degree; however, they all mentioned their many friends and co-workers in the military who had not taken college courses. A qualitative study of two groups, one that completed college and one that had not, and their varying experiences, could shed light on personal and environmental factors that were crucial to decisions to enroll or to not enroll, and could help the military to find additional ways to encourage more service members to participate in college. A study of this sort would also benefit institutions and educators in the civilian world, where reliance on statistics for knowledge about student preferences is generally the norm.

In addition, further study could be recommended that might offer a more nuanced view in the literature of veterans who are returning to college in the U.S. after leaving the service. Recent literature on these returning veterans generally assumes that this group of people needs considerable help in negotiating their way through the academic experience. As these participants revealed, they will be quite prepared for their additional college experiences, academically, emotionally and practically. A comparison of veterans who did take college while on active duty and those who start from the very beginning after military service would help create a more differentiated view of this group, and possibly contribute to institutions' ability to serve their needs.

This study revealed several processes and programs that the Military Voluntary Education has put in place to encourage students to complete their degree, while active duty. Several of these practices, which have been in place for decades, are now being discussed, in similar form in the urgent search for ways to

increase degree completion among college students in general. These students mentioned that instructors had been a major motivating force in their pursuit of an associate's degree, not only encouraging them as they took individual courses, but also inspiring them to continue on to a bachelor's degree and acting as role models for what the students might day become. Observations of this process, in the community college classroom, would possibly yield very useful information for educators. Another interesting research field could involve a study of the possibilities of integrating remedial work in the credit-bearing classroom. These participants had benefited from this process, as they had revealed, and observing how this can work, and whether it is effective, would contribute to the current research on ways to improve college student success. Once they leave their small classes and supportive environment behind, are they equipped to enter a classroom with students who either had remedial work, or hadn't needed it? In summary, this study has revealed several directions in which further research might be carried out, both within the military community and at community colleges in general.

Conclusion

> Education is considered to be a positive good which should be fostered so that the fullest potential of both individuals and societies may be achieved and the quality of life enhanced.
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> Cyril O. Houle, 1974, p. 430

Adult students are no longer the exception in higher education. And in community colleges, which are traditionally accepted as the democratizing institutions of higher education, adult, nontraditional students constitute the majority of students. As this

study has shown, they cannot attend in the traditional way, having needs and strengths that differ from those of traditional students. However, when the contexts of their lives are better understood, and when their academic and socioeconomic needs can be met, they may, in their own time, succeed, as these adult students in this study have succeeded. These adult student journeys to a degree revealed that their college experience resulted in profound benefits to the individuals, their families and those around them, even the coming generation. Their stories, and those of other adult, nontraditional students, should be heard and taken to heart. In the diverse society that America has become, these individuals are the future.

"…she's doing it, I'm doing it, and no one's trying to fan out the flames–we're just pouring more fuel on that fire, keep on burning, it's been a wonderful experience. I've self ignited."

Lee, a participant

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Appendix

Invitation to Participate in the Interview and Demographic Questions

Dear,

I have your name and email address from CTC's list of students who are getting ready to graduate from the Europe Campus in June or August of this year. First of all, congratulations on your accomplishment!

I am a graduate student working on a research project on adult community college students who are getting close to a degree, and who have done this while working full time or raising a family or both! The title of the paper I'm writing is "Adult Student Journeys to a College Degree" and the purpose of the study is to look at how and why adult students decide to go back to college, and how they manage to complete their degrees despite busy working and family lives

To do this I'm going to be interviewing students to hear their stories of their own journey since high school, and would like to invite you to participate. The interview will be entirely confidential. Your name, rank or base will not appear in the final paper, and if you mention anyone, their name will also not be used. In addition, within a month after the interview you'll be sent a summary of the interviews I've done that you can review and comment on.

I'm happy to set up and appointment for an interview, which will last approximately one hour, at any place that's convenient for you.

Please return this email and let me know if you would be interested.

To do that, please fill in the below.

I would like to take part in a one-hour confidential interview about my journey to a college degree.
(yes or no)

If yes, please give me a few details about yourself:

*Age*_____

*Gender*_____

Highest level of education of your parents (choose the one with the highest level

attained):

Some high school____ High school degree____ Some College____ College degree____

Marriage Status_____

Children (no or yes – if yes, please say how many)_____

Ethnic/Racial Background_____

I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Lindsay Bibus