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HIGHER EDUCATION AWARENESS AMONGST NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY

Amanda Houser

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HIGHER EDUCATION AWARENESS AMONGST NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS
IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY

by

Amanda Houser

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

at Murray State University

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

P-20 & Community Leadership

Specialization: Postsecondary Leadership

Under the supervision of Dr. Justin Brogan

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my family and friends. I have a special feeling of gratitude to my husband, Rob who helped me get to this point. My parents, Gloria, and Mark for their words of encouragement and their continuing support to pursue my goals. I also dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Blake. Her whimsical personality brightens many of my days. I appreciate the support of my dissertation committee, the men of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and the men of the 2-54 Infantry Battalion.

ABSTRACT

Insufficient research exists concerning why active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers do not pursue education past a high school diploma. Although higher education is becoming a minimum qualification in the civilian world, only 17% of enlisted servicemembers have higher than a high school degree. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences, beliefs, and awareness of Army education benefits and the disconnect between higher education enrollment and active-duty noncommissioned officers. Two-hundred and sixty-five enlisted active-duty noncommissioned officers participated in an online survey and fifty-two noncommissioned officers participated in a one-on-one interview. Using a qualitative, grounded theory research design, both the survey and one-on-one interview question answers were analyzed to identify themes of Army education benefits awareness, usage, and reasons for not pursuing higher education past a high school diploma. The main themes identified from the interviews were 1) the challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experienced when trying use their education benefits; 2) work schedule management; 3) allowing for informational sessions on education benefits; and 4) balancing life in pursuing higher education while being on active-duty. Additional work and research are needed to improve engagement, awareness, and use of Army education benefits to influence active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officer to gain higher education and complete their college degree.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States Army is one of five military branches. The Army comprises 479,785 active-duty soldiers as of 2019 (Duffin, 2021), the largest branch of all military branches. Personnel must be at least seventeen years of voluntary age to join the Army, with the draft stopping with the Vietnam War in the 1970s. The move to voluntary enlistment in the Army brings about challenges and incentives for enlisted soldiers. One of the significant incentives that help recruit new enlisted active-duty soldiers is education benefits while actively serving in the Army and when they transition into a new career or retire.

The United States Army enlisted personnel comprises 83% of 479,785 active-duty soldiers or 398,221 soldiers (Maxfield, 2005, p. 3). Of the enlisted soldiers on active duty, only 67,697 or 17%, have higher than a high school diploma or GED (Maxfield, 2005, p. 3). The small portion of the enlisted active-duty population who have pursued higher education is concerned with the available education funding opportunities. The remaining 82% of enlisted active-duty soldiers have not pursued higher degrees or skillsets, which will be needed to be promoted within the Army and seek other employment when they leave active-duty service.

Army Regulation 621-5 provides the guidance on how to perform a valid needs assessment survey of the enlisted populations of both the 75th Ranger Regiment and 2nd Battalion, 54th Infantry Division (Army Continuing Education System, 2019, p. 77). This portion of the Army Regulation refers to the Educational Needs Assessment to collect this study's education data. "The Needs Assessment Survey is a continuous, systematic analysis of an installation's educational requirements" (Drake, 2002, p. 107).

The assessment process consists of six steps: clarifying goals, determining the experiential base, gathering information, evaluating information, prioritizing resources, and analyzing the results (Army Continuing Education System, 2019, p. 52). For this study, gathering information through a survey, evaluation of the results, and one-on-one interviews will be used.

Purpose of Study

The lack of knowledge regarding the relationship between enlisted active-duty soldiers across the same rank and the resources provided to pursue higher education is unknown. Personnel with the same rank and similar years of experience within the Army have access to the same education benefits regardless of their work area of focus. For example, a private first-class (PFC) or the United States Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) has access to education centers and counselors based on their assigned duty station. A PFC in the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has an added layer of educational support that others do not have access. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between 75th Ranger Regiment enlisted soldiers' awareness, usage of education benefits, and support from battalion-specific education counselors and enlisted soldiers assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 54th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia.

To assist with developing long-term policies and goals that affect the delivery of educational benefits and use of their local education resources. Data resulting from this study will be of value in evaluating soldiers' use and understanding of educational benefits regarding college and continuing education. This study is of potential interest to the command teams in the 75th Ranger Regiment and within the 2-54 Infantry Division.

Guiding Research Framework

The conceptual framework provides a broad overview to provide historical and current literature themes, which is the foundation for this study's research, context, and importance. The study's theoretical framework focuses on Andragogy theories and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Motivation (Maslow, 1970, p. 25). Iqbal's (2007) doctoral research described the following:

A conceptual framework, in the context of the research process, is a guiding set of beliefs and concepts that provide a basis for designing, implementing, and analyzing leadership influence in order to affect organizational goals with life-long learning among the members (p. 26).

Andragogy

In 1968, Knowles developed the concept of andragogy or the arts and science of helping adults learn. The focus on how adults learn and the difference between them and children aligns with the desire to pursue higher education. Most active-duty enlisted soldiers have only a high school diploma or GED; the need to continue their education is associated with their education experience in K-12 schooling. Adults associate learning based on their high school experience, which can be a pressure point for continuing education. Knowles breaks down andragogy into four principles.

The first principle is that adults learn more from experiences and mistakes than the traditional classroom learning style. The second principle analyzes how adults prefer a pragmatic approach to learning to apply what they are learning to solve a specific problem or relate it to their lives. The third principle is being able to use the information and knowledge gained through

their education immediately. The information needs to be relevant and essential to their work and personal life. The final principle identifies adults needing to be involved in the instruction, implementation, and evaluation of their learning material. Adults, especially active-duty enlisted soldiers, want relevant and significant course material and instruction that aligns to their current lifestyle. The concept of andragogy reflects the importance of adult learning and how their unique desires are separate than traditional-aged college students learning styles. The delayed time between traditional learning creates the need to be concise and relevant to what active-duty soldiers want to learn.

Life-Long Learning Theory

Psychologist Abraham Maslow established a five-tier model comprised of basic human needs and motivational theory set in a hierarchical pyramid that feeds upon the one below it. The pyramid works from the bottom up based on "physiological (food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization" (McLeod, 2020, p. 2). Each level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs must be met before an individual can move up to the next level. In this phase, individuals want to become the greatest that they can be and desire more from their current situation. When it comes to the needs of active-duty soldiers, their desire to pursue higher education or additional skillsets fall into the fifth need, which is self-actualization.

"Typically, about one-third of potential learners give personal satisfaction as their main reason for learning, but in most studies, half or more of the potential learners mention personal satisfaction as one of their reasons for learning" (Layne, 2009, p. 13). The concept of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is utilized with the desire for active-duty soldiers to level-up on through the

pyramid. The progression of knowledge and life-long learning through the traditional means of higher-level academic courses, amplifies both the United State Army and the civilian sectors value on education.

Research Questions

RQ: What do active-duty soldiers indicate hinders them from pursuing higher education?

SRQ1: Are there career advancement advantages or disadvantages of obtaining higher education?

SRQ2: Would having a specialized education counselor increase or decrease the desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ3: Does having access to an on-post education center provide an increase or decrease in desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ4: What is the active-duty soldiers' awareness of the education benefits?

SRQ5: What is the active-duty soldiers' attitude towards higher education?

Significance of the study

There is a gap in research and its findings regarding active-duty enlisted soldiers in the U.S. Army participating in higher education. A review of the literature uncovers additional variables within the scope of this research study. The primary awareness of resources available and the desire to pursue higher education are unfounded. Specific studies focusing on the impact of awareness and education resource access are minimal. Identifying the common themes within literature and studies reiterates the independent variables and necessary tools to overcome perceived barriers for active-duty enlisted soldiers to pursue higher education in the U.S. Army.

Definitions of Terms

There are terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used throughout the armed forces and within the United States Army. The importance of understanding the popularly used terms and definitions will improve the readability and comprehension of the study. The definitions clarify and elaborate on the military verbiage.

75th Ranger Regiment. "The 75th Ranger Regiment is the U.S. Army's premier large-scale special operations force, and it is made up of some of the most elite Soldiers in the world; Rangers specialize in joint special operations raids and joint forcible entry operations" (United States Army, *United States Army Rangers*, N/A, para. 1).

Adult Education Center. An adult education center provides resources to research institutions, explore ways to finance education, and house local institutions, testing centers, and transition assistance (Military One Source, 2021 October, para. 2).

Army University. "The Army University integrates all of the professional military education institutions within the Army into a single educational structure modeled after many university systems across the country" (Army University, 2022, para. 1).

Drill Sergeant. A drill sergeant is a symbol of excellence in initial entry training, an expert in all warrior tasks and battle drills, lives the Army values, exemplifies the warrior ethos, and most importantly- is the epitome of the Army as a profession. Drill sergeants are responsible for coaching, counseling, and mentoring of thousands, of Soldiers as they transform from a civilian to a combat-ready Soldier (United States Army, *U.S. Army Drill Sergeant*, N/A, para. 1).

Enlisted. Enlisted soldiers start their careers as junior enlisted personnel or privates. The pay grade rankings are designated as E-1 through E-9. An enlistee may rise through the lower ranks quickly, although promotions tend to happen less frequently after the rank of E-4 because Congress limits the number of these positions (Military One Source, 2021 September, para. 1).

FORSCOM. "FORSCOM produces combat-ready and globally responsive Total Army Forces that are well-led, disciplined, trained, and expeditionary ready now to deploy and win in Large Scale Combat Operations against near-peer threats" " (United States Army, *About FORSCOM*, N/A).

Noncommissioned Officer. "A service member reaches the rank of a noncommissioned officer at the rank of E-4 or E-5. Noncommissioned officers are high-ranking enlisted members who have leadership authority" (Military One Source, 2021 September, para. 7).

Officer. "A commissioned military officer holds a four-year college degree or higher and has undergone officer training" (Military One Source, 2021 September, para. 8).

Rank. "Rank is an indication of pay grade, provides a system of leadership that indicates a Soldier's level of expertise, responsibility and authority inside that profession" (United States Army, *U.S. Army ranks*, N/A).

USASOC. The United States Army Special Operations Command mans, trains, equips, educates, organizes, sustains, and supports forces to conduct special operations across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of joint force commanders and interagency partners, to meet theater and national objectives (USASOC, N/A).

Abbreviations

ACCESS Army Credentialing and Continuing Education Services for Soldiers

BDFS Bachelor's degrees for Soldiers

MGIB Montgomery GI Bill

PGIB Post 9/11 GI Bill

Summary

Chapter 1 provides context to the study, discussion of the problem, the background, and to validify the research. Chapter 1 contained all necessary abbreviations and definitions commonly used within the U.S. Army to understand better the terminology used throughout the literature reviewed and study additionally, it also lists the guiding research questions of this study along with the hypothesis of those research questions. Chapter 2 will focus on the review of literature aligned with the nature of this study regarding military education benefits, education as a driving factor of enlisting in the U.S. Army, active-duty soldier education, civilian education, and transitioning soldiers.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative research study explored the interpretations and meanings active-duty enlisted soldiers attached to their lived experiences as military students seeking higher education beyond a high school diploma. The study employed a grounded theory research design approach to understand the active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers' points of view, opinions, and knowledge of military education benefits along with their lived experiences in pursuing higher education. The literature review provided a synopsis of current and historical literature on active-duty enlisted soldiers', military education benefits, and the impact higher education has on a noncommissioned officer's participation in pursuing education beyond a high school diploma. The chapter highlighted the history of military education from post-World War II, military programs from the 20th-century to the 21st-century, and specific support active-duty enlisted soldiers in pursuing higher education require. The foundational theories for the literature review focused on the aspect of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers' work life balance, retention, and degree completion viewed through the lens of two theories: Andragogy and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Founding of Army Education

The article *What is Army University supposed to do and how is it going so far?* in the Journal of Military Learning breaks down what the United States Army provides in education and educational support for active-duty soldiers. Soldiers receive the designated educational benefits as part of Title 10 and Title 32, United States Code, on January 3rd, 1956 (Title 10, 1956, p. 78). This federal code requires that all active-duty and National Guard soldiers receive

assistance to pay for their college tuition each military fiscal year. "An educated soldier gives the Army a tremendous return on investment; we are meeting our goals to create technology-savvy soldiers to support Army Transformation, succeed on the digitized battlefield, enhance retention and help soldiers achieve academic degrees while serving" (Brotherton, 2002, p. 19).

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act or the GI Bill of Rights established education benefits, primarily the GI Bill, for World War II veterans returning from battle. The GI Bill of Rights was the first time any soldier who honorably served their military contract would be guaranteed education benefits when transitioning out of the military. This voluntary bill allowed millions of men who returned from World War II to pursue higher education. Not only did the establishment of the G Bill give an incentive for soldiers currently serving in an active-duty capacity to continue with their contraction, but it was a recruitment tool to gain new soldiers into the Armed Forces. President Roosevelt assigned the Veterans Administration (V.A.) responsibility for implementing its key provisions: education and training, loan guaranty for homes, farms, and businesses (Castleman et al., 2018, p. 7).

The GI Bill can fund a college degree or vocational training to give the millions of transitioning soldiers the skills to enter the workforce and contribute to the economy. The guaranteed education benefits from the GI Bill when soldiers transitioning from the military had positive and negative implications on active-duty retention. Leadership within the Armed Forces found that active-duty soldiers served the minimum time obligation on their contracts so they could leave active-duty status to utilize their GI Bill benefits. Implementation of GI Bill benefits led to exploration into retention methods to keep soldiers on active-duty status.

Army Regulation 621-5

The U.S. Army is comprised of guidelines and regulations to maintain order and consistency across its ranks. Army Regulation 621-5 covers the U.S. Army's Army Continuing Education System (ACCESS). A.C.E. oversees all strategic goals, vision, missions, and programs provided to active-duty, reserve, and national guard soldiers. Within Army Regulation 621-5, the Commanding General of the U.S. Army covers the educational objectives for soldier development. Chapter three, Army Continuing Education System Programs and Services section I, Army Regulation 3-1, covers enlisted noncommissioned soldiers' education milestones.

The tenants of lifelong learning are prevalent in ACCESS goals for noncommissioned enlisted active-duty soldiers. Army Regulation 621-5 provides a framework and timeline for when education degrees and goals should be achieved. Not all enlisted soldiers follow these guidelines due to their job duties, personal desire, or time of service. Army Regulation 621-5 is a stepping point for education research and need within the U.S. Army for soldiers to continue their pursuit of lifelong learning and gain additional skills to enrich themselves while actively serving in the military and transitioning to a new career in the civilian sector.

Among the U.S. Army enlisted personnel, 82.9% do not participate in formal education beyond the high school level (Maxfield, 2005, p. 4). The fiscal year 2005 of the Army demographics shows Army leadership the human resources of the active-duty Army, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve. In 2005, only 76% of active-duty enlisted soldiers had only a high school diploma. 72% have some college or an associate degree, and 4.7% have a bachelor's degree (Army Continuing Education System, 2019, p. 4). Enlisted active-duty soldiers' education status has been consistent with obtaining only a high school diploma or G.E.D., the minimum to serve in the military. The positive implications of obtaining a higher education grow

overall development in job performance and future career growth. The current state of the issue continues to shed light on the need for higher education and its impact on personal and professional development. Continuing education will increase knowledge, and broader and more intensive participation is critical to strengthening the potential impact of professional development (Belzer, 2005, p. 26).

Army University

Army University (A.U.) was created to help maintain and oversee all tuition assistance requests and efficiently monitor the comings and goings of all educational funding. The United States Army has had a vast history of promoting education within its ranks from the very beginning of the United States of America. These education endeavors included the School for Cavalry and Infantry in 1881 and West Point in 1802 (Britannica, 2021, para. 3). The decorated history of supporting those who want to continue their education and serve their nation from foreign and domestic enemies is critical to Army University's establishment. A.U. has eight fundamental objectives established to address innovation and the desire to promote learning across the Army.

Within the Army University system, the key objectives include the following: develop a world-class faculty, professionalize curriculum development, grow qualified students, adopt nationally recognized standards, improve professional research and publication, expand public-private partnerships, implement new business and governance practices, and create an innovative learning environment (Kem, & Hotaling, 2017, para. 3). Army University on the leading-edge competency-based education (C.B.E.) effort for the soldiers of the United States Army (Kem, & Hotaling, 2017, para. 20).

With the establishment of the Army University, military leaders can now produce the most well-rounded soldiers on and off the battlefield (Army University, 2021, p. 33). The basis behind Army University is to partner with institutions throughout the country to provide high-quality education accessible to all United States Army soldiers that would like to benefit from it. Army University leverages eighty-six institutions with more than 150,000 enrolled students, and it will partner with other universities to provide more opportunities for soldiers through degree participation programs (Clowser, 2015, p. 30).

Institutions throughout the United States provide active-duty soldiers with the ability and flexibility to start or continue their higher education. Most military installations are positioned in the same area or near a community college, a state, or a private university to help make access to higher education more accountable. The connection between active-duty soldiers with immediate access to colleges or universities have a greater chance of pursuing higher education. The creation of Army University set the foundation for active-duty soldiers to enhance their educational desire with surrounding colleges and universities in their areas.

However, most military members do not always have a flexible schedule to dedicate to in-person classes and a traditional sixteen-week college class schedule. Due to the need for more flexibility with the Army University partner schools, the organization has poured resources into online learning and degree programs (Army University, 2021, p. 33). This flexibility of online schools with shorter semester cycles allows for active-duty soldiers to focus on their work obligations, personal and education obligations all at the same time. The online schools promote their military-friendly approach to serving the unique clientele of active-duty soldiers. “We are meeting our goals to create technology-savvy soldiers to support Army Transformation, succeed

on the digitized battlefield, enhance retention and help soldiers achieve academic degrees while serving" (Brotherton, 2002, p. 16).

eArmyU

Army University established a new only education initiative to provide all necessary materials and tuition to participate in online college courses. eArmyU was established in 2001. eArmyU has allowed over 12,000 enlisted soldiers, particularly soldiers of color, to be lining up for the program that offers the soldiers a laptop, Internet access, and free tuition to twenty-three participating colleges and universities (Brotherton, 2002, p. 17). The distance learning component of Army University has guidelines that require active-duty soldiers to have at least three years of retainment left on their military enlistment and that they need to complete at least twelve credits hours within two years to be considered eligible for the program (Brotherton, 2002, p. 17). Eligibility is similar to traditional educational benefits provided through the United States Army, not just at Army University partnering institutions.

Army Continuing Education System

Along with the establishment of the Army University, the Army Continuing Education System (ACCES) "provides a wide range of in-service educational opportunities for enhancing the Army's human resources potential while benefitting the careers of soldiers both during and after military service" (Sticha et al., 2003, p. 5). Army University (2021) described itself as the following:

ACCESS was established following Section 4302, Title 10, U.S. Code, which permitted enlisted members and officers of the Army to study and receive instruction to increase their military efficiency and to enable them to return to civilian life better equipped for industrial, commercial, and business occupations (p. 33).

ACCESS was established to assist alongside Army University in providing educational opportunities for soldiers to better themselves within and outside the military. The passing of ACCESS following 10 U.S.C. 4302 implemented the use of Education Centers to be established on every military installation to allow for easier access to higher education (Army University, 2022, p. 16). These Education Centers house various programs such as English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) courses, high school completion programs, Basic Skills Education Program (BSEP) to increase the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) scores, and house local higher education institutions (Army University, 2022, p. 16).

Army Credentialing and Continuing Education Services for Soldiers

ACCESS and Education Centers are a one-stop shop that allows active and retired soldiers resources to pursue their education. Along with the Education Centers, Education Counselors monitor students' degree completion progress. Army IgnitED is the site where active-duty soldiers request credentialing assistance or tuition assistance. Army IgnitED replaced Go Army Ed as the funding and pathway platform Education Counselors serve as gatekeepers. Army University examined the impact the ACCESS program had on active-duty soldiers' retention and performance (Army University, 2021, p. 33).

Researchers selected a cohort of Army enlisted soldiers from ranks E-4 to E-6 and monitored their participation in ACCESS programs. Noncommissioned officers lasted for six years, including administrative information, promotion information, and observed performance ratings by supervisors, along with their option to reenlist for a more extended contract. Through this cohort, Army University determined that ACCESS programs such as tuition assistance brought a positive trend of reenlisting and promoting to the next rank faster (Army University, 2021, p. 64). Participation in T.A. was associated with a 7-percentage point increase in the

likelihood that a soldier would reenlist at the end of his or her first term of service (Sticha et al., 2003, p. 7). When it came to promoting faster, participation in T.A. was also associated with earlier promotion to E-6 (Sticha et al., 2003, p. 7). Army University and ACCESS programs positively affect active-duty soldiers and an increased success rate in the Army. The establishment of these Army comprehensive initiatives and other Army education benefits make it more desirable to obtain a college degree while serving in an active-duty capacity.

Current Army Education Programs

Transferring Education Benefits

Active-duty soldiers who have served six years on a contract with the Army and agree to serve another four years can transfer their GI Bill benefits to their spouse or dependents. For dependents to be considered eligible for the GI Bill education benefits, family members must be enrolled in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) program to receive the benefits. The transferring of GI Bill education benefits has been associated with upward mobility of family members who were transferred and utilized their parents GI Bill (Castleman et al., 2018, p. 7). The benefits package includes up to 36 months paid tuition, a locality-adjusted monthly housing allowance, and a stipend for books and supplies; the total value of these benefits exceeds \$200,000 in higher-cost states (Castleman et al., 2018, p. 7).

The expanded ability to transfer GI Bill benefits using their Post 9/11 option freed up funding for the service member to take advantage of educational opportunities while securing future college funding for their children. Having two sources of education funding provides active-duty service members the opportunity to use their annually renewing tuition assistance and keep their GI Bill benefits for future use. The tuition assistance funds, and Post 9/11 GI Bill funds can be used simultaneously for servicemembers whose children are of age to utilize the

benefits or for spouses expanding their education. The GI Bill and the annual \$4,000 in tuition assistance can be used to pay for college tuition, and credentials are both key incentives for capturing new and currently serving active-duty soldiers to reenlist.

Tuition Assistance

The Department of Defense enacted the creation of tuition assistance in the late 1940s. Tuition Assistance (T.A.) allows active-duty soldiers to have an allotted amount of funding each fiscal year for tuition to the participating colleges and universities in the T.A. program. T.A. fluctuates from \$4,000 to \$5,000 per military fiscal year, starting on October 1st each year. T.A. funds can be used to fund one associate, bachelor's, or master's degree. Tuition assistance funding is available to active-duty soldiers to pursue a graduate credential associated with an accredited academic institution as well.

The establishment of the tuition assistance program was part of a retention program to keep soldiers reenlisting within the United States Army. Data from a study in 1991 indicated strong and consistent associations between participation in the T.A. program and retention in the military and a strong correlation between participation and enlisted promotion (Anderson, 1991, p. 1). The creation of the tuition assistance programs primarily in the United States Army allows active-duty soldiers to take college courses at set price per credit to ensure little to almost no cost expense on the soldier. Each fiscal year, soldiers can use a monetary limit towards their college tuition. The amount allocated to each active-duty soldier does fluctuate each year and is also provided when the funds are available through the yearly military budget. The incentive of tuition assistance is a tool to recruit and retain soldiers. The notion that funding for education is not consistent from year to year is a pain point that negatively affects relations between Army lower-level active-duty soldiers and leadership on the federal level.

Tuition Assistance Awareness

Two hundred and twelve Army Reserve Soldiers were surveyed throughout the 89th Regional Support Command (R.S.C.). The 89th R.S.C. is spread out amongst Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. “There was no statistically significant relationship between soldiers' awareness and use of the Tuition Assistance Program and their decision to reenlist” (Drake, 2002, p. 6). However, 61.3 % of responders plan to use the T.A. This response was attributed to recruiters' higher marketing efforts for the program during their initial enlistment contract.

Tuition assistance was made available shortly before the study was conducted. Tuition assistance for the active-duty military is a way for higher education to be pursued without utilizing GI Bill benefits, with different perimeters attached. The availability of funds for active-duty soldiers both in the traditional Army and Army Reserves is a total to help recruit new soldiers while also converting possible discharged soldiers to reenlist for additional contracts.

Active-Duty Soldiers

Active-duty soldiers want to pursue their education and have unique challenges. The awareness of educational opportunities, motivating factors, and identifying barriers to continuing higher education are perceived barriers to education. The perceived and actual barriers of cost, time, duty assignment, duty location, lack of interest, and lack of course offerings (Layne, 2009, p. 35) hinder active-duty soldiers from completing or starting their higher education. Research on U.S. Army enlisted personnel revealed a lack of course offerings as a deterrent; addressing the lack of course offerings is becoming a moot point as technology, and online delivery methods improve (Layne. 2009, p. 29). There may be a positive correlation between the level to which military leaders encourage education and how military personnel participate in postsecondary educational opportunities which needs to be explored. Due to work and personal obligations and

family constraints, active-duty soldiers do not always have time to dedicate to their education. Not pursuing a higher degree is abundant with mitigating circumstances, including training cycles, deployments, moving duty stations, and progressing in rank.

The need of active-duty military service members enrolled in higher education and to develop new insights that may be helpful to colleges and universities in designing initiatives, strategic plans, and resources to address these needs most effectively (Brown, 2014, p. 3). Interviews with ten servicemembers found that four unique challenges were common throughout their experience pursuing higher education while serving on active duty and while deployed. Four primary themes concerning the unique challenges and responsibilities of active-duty military students while on deployment emerged: (1) challenges to higher education, (2) Internet-related challenges to completing coursework, (3) challenges to focus and concentration, and (4) proactiveness and responsibility of service members (Brown, 2014, p. 46).

The challenges of higher education active-duty soldiers encounter include formal education gaps. Enlisted active-duty soldiers typically do not have a college degree. Therefore, they have lapse in education going from their high school years to college education. Along with the gap in education, work related uncertainties lead to active-duty soldiers' willingness to pursue their education. Most often the unforeseen nature of no notice overseas deployments and military training in remote areas do not always permit internet usage. The disconnect in telecommunications is an increasing burden on an active-duty soldier. Additionally, the focus of a servicemember is their role in protecting the United States from enemies foreign and domestic, the need to stay in top military readiness can deter willingness to focus and dedicate time to personal higher education.

Military View on Education

A report in 1989 sought out the practices and trends affecting military personnel attending postsecondary education and the military's stance on education. In this report, three military factors were uncovered. The following are among military factors that affect decision making about military personnel seeking postsecondary education opportunities: (1) the class are within the military is currently favorable toward postsecondary education; (2) military recruits' educational attainment is relatively high; (3) definitions of nontraditional learning are ambiguous (Stewart, 1989, p. 1). The report's contextual factors include the military leadership climate towards education. Servicemembers in 1989 aspired for off-duty college education, and participation in pursuing a higher degree is encouraged and supported. The steady increase in higher education pursuit led to the U.S. Army to implement Army Regulation 621-5 that establishes the tenets of life-long learning for active-duty soldiers.

College Enrollment

In 2011, there was an increase in college enrollment with senior enlisted active-duty soldiers compared to younger enlisted active-duty soldiers (Duffin, 2021, p. 12). Active-duty enlisted soldiers who found a positive and negative effects of college enrollment and the use of educational benefits compared different age groups within the military to civilians in the same age range (Duffin, 2021, p. 12). The fact that enlistment increases college enrollment, but not overall degree attainment, could imply that enlistees have lower college completion rates than civilians (Loughran et al., 2011, p. 60). Higher college completion rates occur when training and deployment cycles interrupt their education while being on active-duty throughout their careers.

A two-year associate degree is more attainable than a four-year bachelor's degree due to the up and down nature of an active-duty soldier's training, deployment, and moving cycle.

Active-duty soldiers are not able to be full-time students and full-time soldiers. Active-duty soldiers are part-time students primarily taking one or two courses throughout the eight- or sixteen-week semesters to balance a college course load and unpredictable work schedules. Education benefits, including tuition assistance, can pay for one degree. Active-duty soldiers may have the opportunity to complete their associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees paid through tuition assistance funding that renews each federal fiscal year. The enticement of multiple degrees along with a GI Bill is used as an incentive to recruit high-quality individuals and recapture others through reenlistment contracts (Ming, 2014, p. 17).

Education Completion

Governmental programs offer service members not only financial support, such as MGIB, SLRP, and T.A., but also academic support, through programs such as Yellow Ribbon, Veteran Upward Bounds, Military OneSource, and base support center programs, which provide academic mentoring, guidance, and counseling (Ming, 2014, p. 17). Research on the mitigating factors determining military students' completing their postsecondary education was conducted in 2014. Contributing factors to why military students have a complex and long journey to complete their higher education. Those factors include being older than their peers in their college courses, working full-time while taking classes part-time, calls of duty such as deployment and training cycles, and personal matters such as added stress of being in a military family. For military students, benefits for completing a postsecondary degree may include lower unemployment, more prestigious careers, and higher salaries (Ming, 2014, p. 19).

Education Reenlistment

The United States Army and all DoD branches lose a portion of their force due to retirement or discharge, honorable or otherwise. To remain fully battle-ready, the Army must

continually recruit new soldiers. Under the guidance of the Department of Defense, the correlation between education benefits and soldier recruitment and retention (Wegner et al., 2017, p. 23). The military is searching for high-quality recruits, "a high-quality enlisted recruit is considered to be one with at least a high school diploma and better than average scores on the AFQT; these recruits have a better record of completing their initial term of service than other recruits" (Wegner et al., 2017, p. 32). The appeal of education benefits is a bonus to recruiting high-quality individuals and other military entitlements. These include enlistment bonuses, health care, and basic housing allowance (B.A.H.).

"In the 1999 Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS), getting money for college was one of the top six goal items that differentiated military service from civilian employment" (Wegner et al., 2017, p. 31). "Money for education" was more likely to be a primary motivation for joining among these late joiners than among recent high school graduates (87% of late joiners listed it as a primary motivation, while 80% of high school enlistees did so)" (Wegner et al., 2017, p. 31). The initial motivation to join the military for education benefits is a driving factor for recruits. However, the desire to enroll in college and college degree conferral differ drastically.

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in 1998 of active-duty soldiers on their participation in non-military-related education. The quantitative analysis supports the conclusion that long-term participation in off-duty education is significantly and positively related to intention to reenlist (Brauchle, 1998, p. 12). The opportunity for employer-funded education benefits like tuition assistance, the MGIB, and the PGIB continues to be a leader in recruitment and retention. These education benefits serve as a model for other public and private sector organizations to emulate for their employers.

Retaining servicemembers drives the DoD and the United States Army to offer newer and better programs to keep them on active duty. Active-duty soldiers have the unique situation of being ready to deploy to combat, train, and assist with natural disasters at any moment. The added addition of needing higher education for their future is often placed on the back burner due to the uncertain work obligations associated with being an active-duty soldier.

Noncommissioned Officer Education

The Army is now, more than ever, placing an increased emphasis on higher-level civilian education among the enlisted force (Brutus, 2019, p. 1). The U.S. Army has been made to provide additional educational support to enlisted soldiers through the establishment of Army University. Along with the Army's desire to align military training with civilian education credentialing standards (2019, p. 1). Civilian education has typically been used for soldiers to earn additional promotion points that can be used when soldiers go to the board to move up to the next rank.

With the establishment of Army University, a designated force pushes out marketing material on why civilian education is essential. Brutus mentions that the need to meet promotion points alone is no longer the driving factor behind higher education and noncommissioned officers (2019, p. 1). Army University is used for marketing civilian education for high-critical thinking, higher job performance, and better jobs outside of the military. Marketing material can persuade enlisted soldiers to have an increased desire to earn a college degree.

Military Credit

Since it is common for soldiers to move between military installations worldwide, having multiple military options in their designated area makes it easier to continue or start their higher education journey. Institutions are all regionally accredited and agreed to the outlined objectives

of the program. For the institutions that are a part of the network, active-duty soldiers are more likely to pursue a degree from those involved because they get additional perks that they would typically not be provided by those institutions.

The biggest draw for soldiers to start their higher education degree is the additional credits earned from their Military Occupation Specialty (M.O.S.). “Institution awards credit, where applicable within the degree plan, for nontraditional learning, for M.O.S. experience, military training courses and results of national examinations based on recommendations of the American Council on Education (A.C.E.)” (Anderson, 1987, p. 4). The extra college credit given to soldiers allows them to complete their degree while being on active duty to free up their GI Bill for their spouses or dependents. The transferability of knowing that soldiers can utilize thirty-six months of paid college tuition and housing for themselves, or their children is an additional benefit that can spread across generations. The expanded transferability options of the GI Bill were an additional initiative to increase the retention of soldiers serving on active duty (Castleman et al., 2018, p. 7).

Adult Education

Adult learning theories and their framework for education and higher learning started the craze for the need to study continuing education in adults and the methods that address their unique issues (Houle, 1980, p. 15). It [increase in adult education] might well be called a second era of continuing professional education, following the first which was part of the formal establishment of the professions themselves (Houle, 1980, p. 21)—exploring historical perspectives of the learning habits and needs of adult students led to the exploration of other adult education theories.

The difficulty of identifying scholarly work studying adult education is due to the multidimensional nature of the field of study. To address the lack of information on how adults learn, the desire to understand the barriers adult learners perceive when pursuing higher education. Survey results were analyzed from individuals with more education than high school diplomas. It was found that people with more education were more interested in continuing their education because of greater awareness of opportunities available (Cross, 1981, p.110, para. 5). The correlation between adult learning, their awareness of educational opportunities, and their desire to continue their education primarily focuses on active-duty soldiers.

Andragogy

The four principles of the andragogic (or andragogical) approach are that adults learn from experience (even if they make mistakes), adults favor a pragmatic approach, and must be able to apply learning to solve a specific problem. Adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance, and adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation their instruction (Knowles, 2019, p. 5). The learning style of andragogy is hands-on and self-paced, typically not centered around an instructor or professor. Adult learners create a foundation of information and material that depends on skills on knowledge in areas that are useful to their lives directly. Andragogy is focused on learning being self-driven and designed rather than being teacher-centric. Knowles noted that Proper adult education helps adults understand themselves clearly and objectively. They learn to grasp their motivations, needs, interests, goals, capacities; as they grow in self-understanding, adults should also increase in self-respect and a passion for continuing growth (Knowles, 2019, p. 24).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs addresses the motivation theory and how each pyramid level builds upon the other. Maslow discovered that individuals have a needs-based chart that must be met to achieve the next step. The five steps in the model are "physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization" (McLeod, 2020, p. 1). A human's basic needs need to be fulfilled to search out self-development opportunities that would better themselves and their families. The step where an individual becomes the best version of themselves and seeks out opportunities belongs in the top tier of self-actualization.

Summary

A gap in the literature exists due to the lack of studies and research on why enlisted noncommissioned active-duty soldiers use the allocated education benefits and resources provided to them through the U.S. Army and initiatives like Army University and ACCESS. The literature gap does not address the awareness of U.S. Army enlisted personnel in higher education. Reviewing the literature associated with this study presented the opportunity to understand further the independent and dependent variables and additional information regarding the U.S. Army enlisted noncommissioned active-duty soldier personnel.

Identifying the common trends and themes in the literature is necessary to combat the perceived and actual barriers to pursuing higher education and awareness of education benefits. It is necessary to bring awareness of the educational opportunities, benefits, perceived barriers, and access to education experts active-duty soldiers have. Using themes from the review of literature assists in preparing questions for a detailed survey and survey to examine the awareness, attitudes, and beliefs of pursuing higher education in noncommissioned soldiers across Fort Benning, Georgia.

Chapter 2 reviewed recent and relevant literature that explored military education benefits, implementation of military programs, and the Army's stance on active-duty higher education. Chapter 3 will cover the methodology, research design, and exploration of the research questions that frame this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 describes the research questions and the purpose and appropriateness of design, population, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, the chapter includes the hypothesis and sampling method. Confidentiality is fundamental to the sampling framework, which leads to measures to protect participants' identities, privacy, and personal identifiers. The methodology chapter concludes with a discussion of the survey design and instrument's external and internal validity and reliability.

Research Design

A grounded theory design will identify the two groups of noncommissioned officers' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions towards higher education within the military. Grounded theory design is used to explore relationships, concepts, and correlations between the knowledge of education benefits, the resources, and the participation in higher education of enlisted personnel. The qualitative study used one-on-one interviews and survey collection to examine attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and awareness of education benefits of U.S. Army enlisted noncommissioned officers stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia.

A survey was administered to active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment located at Fort Benning, Georgia. Questions from the survey instrument (see Appendix I) included the awareness and ranking of education knowledge. The qualitative design was achieved through one-on-one interviews with participating active-duty soldiers. These included noncommissioned officers from the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The interviews were used to ask open-ended

questions to gather additional information. Commonalities between participants asked during the interviews (see Appendix K) included the beliefs and opinions related to pursuing a higher education degree and the difficulty of achieving a bachelor's degree.

Research Questions

RQ: What do active-duty soldiers indicate hinders them from pursuing higher education?

SRQ1: Are there career advancement advantages or disadvantages of obtaining higher education?

SRQ2: Would having a specialized education counselor increase or decrease the desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ3: Does having access to an on-post education center provide an increase or decrease in desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ4: What is the active-duty soldier's awareness of the education benefits?

SRQ5: What is the active-duty soldiers' attitude towards higher education?

Population

The population for the study was active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. According to the *Digital Welcome Packet* distributed by the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, 27,436 U.S. Army personnel (enlisted and officers) are on active-duty at Fort Benning, Georgia (Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, 2021, p. 2). According to an internal roster, there are 1,872 Rangers in the 75th Ranger Regiment stationed at Fort Benning and around 150 Cadre within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion (Perstat, 2021). The 2-54 is not a typical infantry battalion in terms of manning due to the fact they are a basic training unit for privates who remain within the organization for twenty-six weeks. Typical Army "battalions consist of

four to six companies and can include up to about 1,000 soldiers” (Department of Defense, 2022, para. 5).

Sample

The sample consisted of active-duty U.S. Army enlisted soldiers available to complete the survey and interview based on the allocated downtime by leadership in between training cycles, block leave, and deployments. Of the active-duty soldiers, survey group proposed sample size was 250-300 participants and 50-100 participants in the one-on-one interviews. Justification for the proposed sample size is large enough to allow the unfolding of a ‘new and richly textured understanding’ of the phenomenon study, but small enough so that the ‘deep, case-oriented analysis’ (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 183). A random sampling method was used to select participants from the population pool for interviews based on availability and access. Participating enlisted soldiers were asked to complete the survey voluntarily.

Informed Consent

A letter was sent and signed by the battalion leadership at 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment explaining the purpose of the study and requesting participation from enlisted noncommissioned officers (see Appendix D and F). The introductory letter included the informed consent form concerning personal identifiers and the use of data (see Appendix E and G). Additionally, the introductory letter informed battalion leadership and participants that there were no foreseeable emotional, psychological, physical, or social risks to the participant, and any information provided was voluntary (Layne, 2009, p. 54). Before being a part of the study, participants signed the informed consent form (see Appendix C). The informed consent form

included an introduction to the research, the purpose, the research scope, and voluntarily participating in the survey and interview.

Confidentiality

Questions on the survey were asked for large-scale identifies such as rank, battalion, and company rather than names to maintain confidentiality. The use of non-identifying questions on the survey was used. Every individual participating in the survey signed an informed consent form, and their battalion leadership signed the same informed consent form (see Appendix E and G). The one-on-one interviews were kept confidential by using only alias identifiers only known to the researcher. All personal information such as name and contextual identifiers were meticulously redacted in all data collection and data storage to protect the privacy of all persons, to build trust and rapport with study participants, and to maintain ethical standards and the integrity of the research process (Baez, 2022, p. 35-58).

Risk

There were minimal risks to the participants or battalions. “Minimal risk meaning the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves from those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examination or tests (45 CFR 46.102 (I))” (Institutional Review Board, 2022, p. 3). The known benefit to participants is that information and awareness of continuing education opportunities are available, and the notion that the learning opportunities and benefits may become wider known and distribute. No participants in the study were members of a protected category such as a minor, pregnant woman when considered part of a designated research group of women, prisoners, or cognitively impaired (Layne, 2009, p. 54).

There was no physical, mental, psychological, social, or emotional risk involved with participating enlisted personnel.

Data Analysis

The data analysis used was the thematic analysis method and grounded theory. The use of the thematic analysis and grounded theory assisted with the identification of common themes amongst participations regarding experiences or similarities throughout the Army active-duty noncommissioned officer population. Analysis of data included Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) platform, Taguette, Survey Monkey, transcription software Otter, and Microsoft Excel. Taguette software allowed for the importation, organization, and trends of survey and interview data.

Data Security

The original signed informed consent form, survey, and interview notes remain on file in password-protected Microsoft Excel and Word documents scanned from the originals. The original forms are in a locked box in a keypad office in a badge access building on Fort Benning, where the forms will remain for three years and then be destroyed by shredding.

Validity and Reliability

Several steps were taken to mitigate threats to the instrumentation validity. “Threats to instrumentation validity include location where administration of the survey occurs, leading or insensitive questions, and characteristics of a data collector” (Layne, 2009, p. 62). In order to mitigate threats to instrumentation validity, three steps were taken. These steps included secure dissemination of surveys to each participant to complete in privacy, an audit trail, and the use of prolonged involvement. The survey included questions that were clearly stated to ensure no

miscommunication in the interpretation of the question. All one-on-one interviews were held in a private room within their battalion headquarters.

An audit trail established confirmability which involved that the findings were based on participants' responses instead the researcher's own preconceptions and biases (Buchbinder, 2011, p. 107). A brief chronological index shows the relationship between the participant observation, information being gathered and the researcher's thoughts on the study, sampling decisions, and ethical concerns (Buchbinder, 2011, p. 108). Prolonged involvement in the military community was used to establish trust between participants and the researcher and the possible threats of reactivity and respondent bias. In order to limit research bias and influence, minimal contact with participants was necessary. These steps limited any interference or human interaction in the data collection process. Limiting contact with possible sample population was a measure taken to reduce data collector bias. Internal threats to validity when conducting survey research include the interview location and instrumentation. Layne (2009) examined in the following study:

The locations were on the outskirts of the buildings to provide more discretion for participants when entering and exiting the interview room. Internal threats to validity when conducting survey research include mortality, location, instrumentation, and instrument decay because the research examined current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and practices, mortality is not a factor for the study (p. 62).

Description of Instruments

The instrument for this study was designed to its qualitative nature. The design intent was to identify the factors that encourage or hinder participation in higher education, the awareness of educational opportunities, and the desire to pursue higher education. Other survey instruments

encountered throughout the literature were not appropriate because the surveys were one-dimensional and relevant information to the study did not allow for additional insight. Additionally, other instruments did not specifically address the independent and dependent variables, the awareness of education benefits, and the desire to participate in continuing education.

Surveys

Due to the need to identify qualitative data, a survey was used to identify overarching themes and commonalities between participants. The survey was sent to eligible participants who are enlisted soldiers in the U.S. Army. Participants include the Cadre in the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the enlisted Rangers in the 75th Ranger Regiment. Those in this rank bracket of E5- E7 will be the target audience. Surveys were sent via a secured email account using Survey Monkey or dropped off at locations within the battalions to be completed and collected. Participants chose to designate if they would like to schedule a one-on-one interview to discuss further thoughts and concerns on higher education, education benefits, and their awareness of them.

Interviews

Participants identified completed a one-on-one interview after finishing their initial survey. The personal interviews took place in a secure conference room in each battalion, where selected participants scheduled a 20-minute time slot to discuss education items and sections of the survey. The interview protocol framework used comprised of four phases to strength the reliability of the instrument.

The four phases included ensuring interview questions align with the research questions, constructing an inquiry-based conversation, receiving feedback on interview protocols, and piloting the interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 812). The data collected during the interviews identify overarching themes, similarities, and areas of concern regarding education and pursuing formal higher education.

Transcripts

The audio recordings from the one-on-one interviews were transcribed in detail to ensure every detail interaction is noted. The transcriptions included tone of voice, speed, emphasis on words, timing, and pauses to ensure accurate participant answers. Interpretation of the interview exchanges along with non-verbal responses and motions were also transcribed along with the participant responses. Transcriptions of the audio recordings helped validate participant viewpoints without having to rely on the interviewer's memory recall and handwritten notes.

Summary

Chapters 1 and 2 reveal the validity and rationale to conduct the study, identify the study's purpose, research questions, and significance of the study are needed to address the issues of education within the noncommissioned officer ranks. The gap in current research shown in chapter 2 reflects the need to study active-duty enlisted U.S. Army soldiers and their awareness of the Army Education Center, education benefits, and the desire to participate in higher education.

Chapter 3 justifies the research design, questions, and validity. Along with the sampled population, informed consent, and instruments used. The study's design with a qualitative survey, grounded theory design, and one-on-one interviews. The design collects data, identifies

awareness of continuing education opportunities, and ultimately increases the enlisted active-duty population to pursue higher education. Chapter 4 will analyze the results from the interviews and survey collection.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This qualitative research study explored the meanings and interpretations of active-duty enlisted soldiers their experience and knowledge of military education benefits to seek higher education. The study employed a grounded theory design approach to understand the active-duty enlisted soldier's opinions, knowledge of Army education benefits, and meanings they attached to the future outcomes of using these benefits. Chapter 4 reiterates the research questions, the data collection process, analysis of the found data, and discovered themes. Chapter 4 also provided a summary of the analysis process, the study results of knowledge and usage of military education benefits of active-duty enlisted soldiers, and an introduction to Chapter 5.

Data Collection

This grounded theory study began upon receiving approval from the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). Data collection in this qualitative research study consisted of individual online Survey Monkey questionnaire survey and one-on-one interviews. The researcher gained approval from representatives of both the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment to survey participants, conduct interviews, and use their premise as needed (see Appendix E and G). After receiving permission from each organization's representatives, the researcher received a battalion roster from the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and received access to the online battalion roster from the 75th Ranger Regiment. Participants were selected at random based on their rank designation as an enlisted noncommissioned officer.

Eligible participants received a link to the online Survey Monkey survey to their military email address along with a copy of the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) and the signed

Informed Consent: Permission to Use Premises, Name, and/or Subjects Form by their battalion representative (see Appendix E and G). The Informed Consent Form explained the survey's purpose, the risk of participating, and assurance of participant anonymity (see Appendix C). To ensure all responses were kept anonymous, the researcher assigned aliases (PART01- PART265) to each participant so no personal identifiers were available. All survey results were secure per the Survey Monkey privacy policy and only the researcher could access the survey with a login ID and a password.

A total of 265 active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers participated in the online Survey Monkey survey. The active-duty noncommissioned officers answered 11 questions and the digital Informed Consent Form. Three of the online questions were to determine demographics. Three questions were multiple choice to determine highest degree obtained, future education goals, and current education employment needs. Three questions were scale-based questions to determine knowledge of education benefits, reasons hindering them from pursuing higher education, and benefits of pursuing higher education. The final three questions were multiple choice referring to use of the Fort Benning Education Center, Education Counselors, and participation in the one-on-one interviews (see Appendix I).

The one-on-one interviews were the next phase of data collection performed for this qualitative, grounded theory study. Before beginning the data collection process for the one-on-one interview, 67 participants expressed interest in their Survey Monkey survey that they wanted to participate in the one-on-one interview. All participants in the interviews agreed and provided their contact information within the Survey Monkey survey. The digital Informed Consent Form used at the beginning of the Survey Monkey survey was read, reconfirmed, and participants

agreed to the interview protocol and their understanding of how their confidentiality would be protected at the beginning of each interview (see Appendix J).

The next step in the one-on-one interview was for each participant to make an appointment for a twenty-minute session. The interviewer asked each interview question, allowed the participant to answer, clarified any questions the participants might have, asked additional information, or asked necessary follow-up questions. The interviewer kept notes about the participants answers, tone, and nonverbal indicators in a booklet. Every one-on-one interview was recorded through audio recording to collect the tone of voice, speed, emphasis on words, timing, and pauses to ensure accurate participant answers. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked each participant for their responses and time. Each one-on-one interview took place over four days and were approximately 20 minutes in length. After the interview, each participant received a follow-up email with a final copy of their interview transcript.

The data collected from the two phases of the research study, including online files, audio recordings, and transcribed interviews notes were protected by several passwords to maintain data security. All paper notes were scanned and uploaded into a password protected database and the physical material placed in a lock box. The researcher did not maintain any participants' names with the collected data from the survey or interviews. All electronic files, scanned documents, and psychical documents will be kept for three years then destroyed by shredding. To establish validity measures, the triangulation method was used to triangulate the Survey Monkey questions and interview questions to help verify and support the researcher's findings. Validity is additionally established if the Survey Monkey responses and interview responses are similar.

Data Analysis

Prior to the analysis process, the researcher gathered Survey Monkey participant responses, one-on-one interview handwritten notes, and transcribed audio recording files to a password protected file. The Survey Monkey responses were exported into a Microsoft Excel file and placed into the same protected file. Each participant of the study was given an identifier from PART01 to PART265 which was entered into the Survey Monkey responses in the Microsoft Excel. Audio transcriptions from the one-on-one interviews, the codes and themes gathered from the interviews, and a summary of the findings were emailed to each participant to ensure data validity, no changes were requested from any of the 53 interviewed participants.

The analysis process began after collecting the individual online Survey Monkey survey and the one-on-one interview. The analysis process followed the grounded theory approach and the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) platform, Taguette, Survey Monkey, and Microsoft Excel from the outline in chapter 3. As stated in chapter 3, the researcher followed the grounded theory model to assist with the identification of common themes amongst participations regarding experiences or similarities throughout the Army active-duty noncommissioned officer population. The grounded theory model allowed the researcher to understand the participants as they experienced pursuing education while being active-duty and their future education goals without any researcher presuppositions because of the researcher's role and profession.

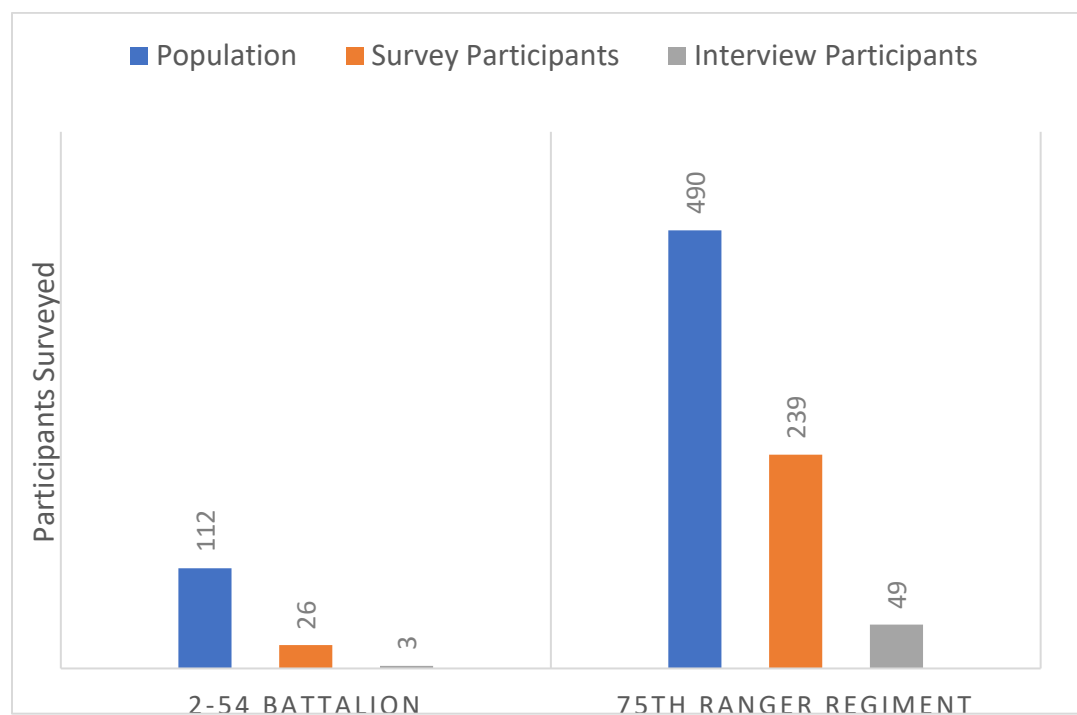
The questionnaires and transcribed interview notes and audio recording were entered into CAQDAS online software to identify themes, experiences, or similarities of participants. Once the online survey questionnaires were exported from Survey Monkey, they were uploaded into CAQDAS. The semi-structured interview questions were also uploaded into CAQDAS, and both

were transcribed, the researcher deleted all audio recordings from the recording device. The initial data analysis coding into Taguette the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software which helped reduce unclear phrases and redundant answers from the transcribed interviews and Survey Monkey exported survey results. The participant responses from the Survey Monkey survey and the one-on-one interviews resulted in 175 standalone references with 62 codes detailing the enlisted noncommissioned officer's knowledge of education benefits and the path forward to use them in their higher education. With the large amount of both standalone references and emerged codes, the researcher had to use clusters and themes to create a more manageable data size for analysis.

Themes were developed from the imputed references and codes into Taguette. The themes were classified and validated by clusters from the participants responses from both the Survey Monkey survey and the one-on-one interviews. The researcher began verifying and validating the data after the clustering was complete in Taguette against the transcribed themes in CAQDAS. The researcher then compared the transcribed and surveyed data to narrow down the overarching themes of the study. Overall, four themes emerged from the participant's responses from the online survey and one-on-one interviews.

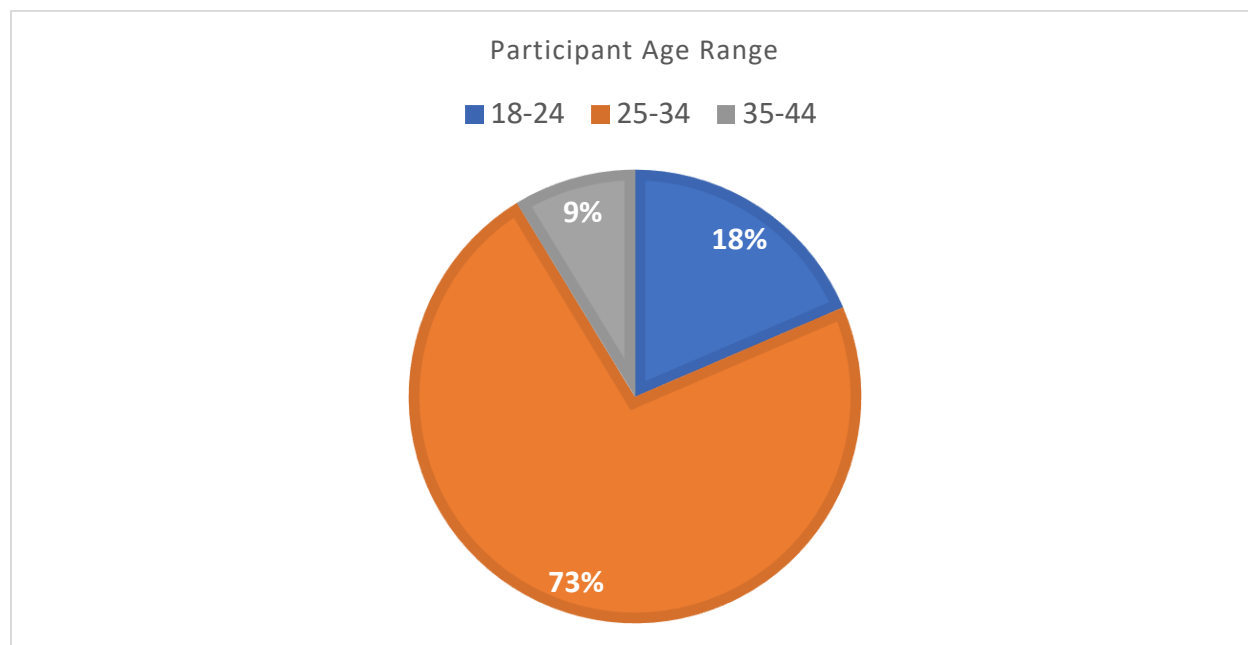
Survey Results

The online Survey Monkey survey collected data from 265 participants various demographic data such age range, military-grade, highest education level obtained, and education goal was gathered. Of the 265 participants involved in the study, participation varied from the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The sample size consisted of 24.1% from the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and 48.8% from the 75th Ranger Regiment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*The Research Study Participants*

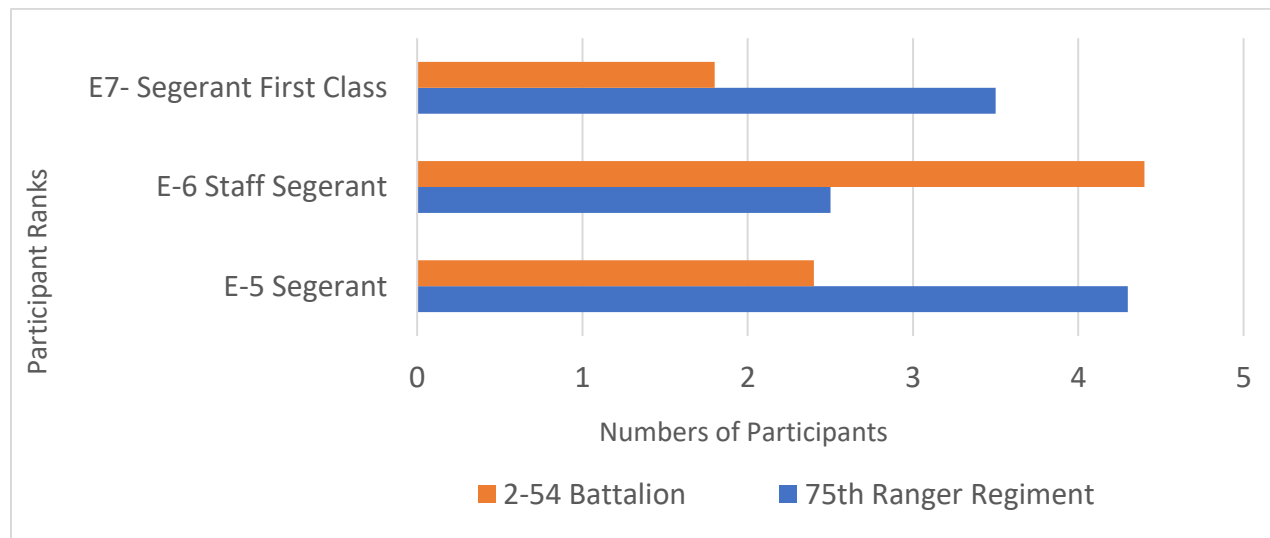
Note. The column graph depicts the participants from each battalion who completed the online Survey Monkey survey, completed the online survey, and interviewed participants.

Of the 265 participants involved in the study, the age range is reflected in the eligible enlisted non-commissioned officers in each battalion. The sample size consisted of three age ranges 18 to 24, 25 to 34, and 35 to 44 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*The Research Study Participants' Age Range*

Note. The pie graph depicts the age range of the research participant who participated in the online survey.

Of the 265 participants involved in the study, the military-grade/rank reflected variance of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers between the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The participant demographic information provided a detailed description of the participants who volunteered to participate Survey Monkey survey. The sample size consisted of enlisted noncommissioned officers E-5 Sergeant, E-6 Staff Sergeant, and E-7 Sergeant First Class (see Figure 3).

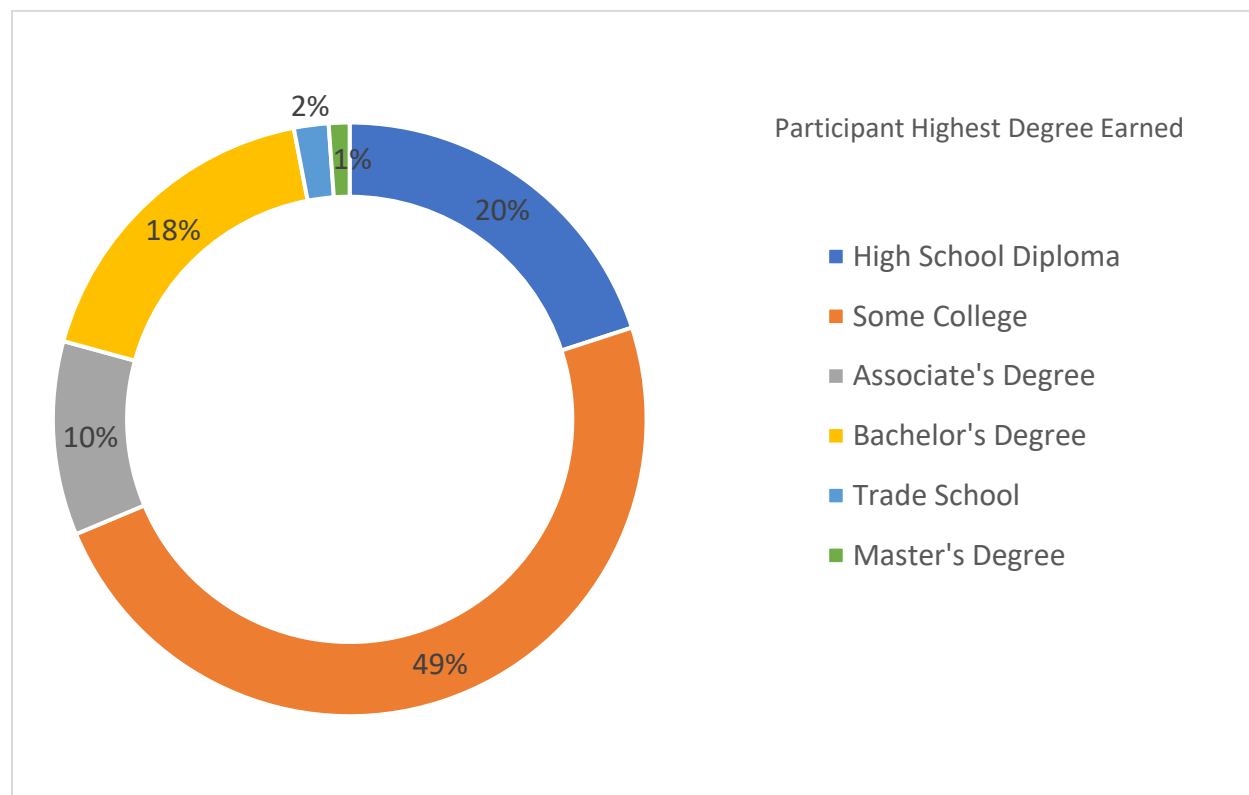
Figure 3*The Research Study Participants' Military Grade/Rank*

Note. The bar graph depicts the research participant's military-grade/rank who participated in the online survey.

Of the 265 participants involved in the study, the highest academic degree obtained reflected variance from the composition of the larger organizations of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The participant demographic information provided a detailed description of the participants who volunteered to participate Survey Monkey survey. The participants highest degree obtained ranged a high school diploma, some college, associate degree, bachelor's degree, trade school, and master's degree (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

The Research Study Participants' Highest Academic Degree Earned

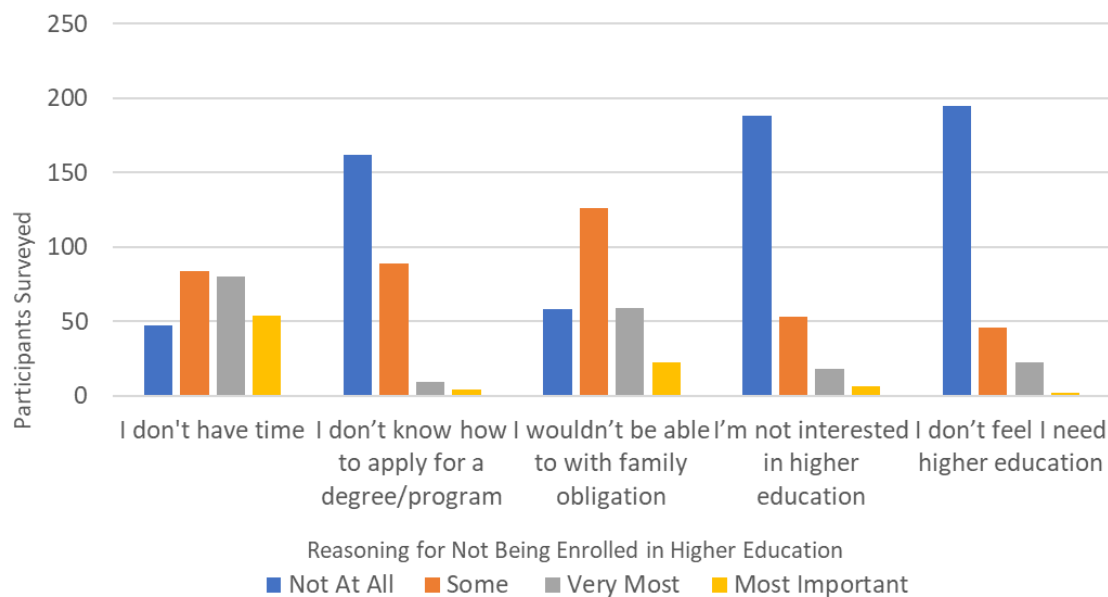


Note. The pie graph depicts each participant's highest academic degree earned.

Of the 265 participants involved in the Survey Monkey survey: the reasoning for not being enrolled in higher education reflected variance from the composition of the larger organizations of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The participant demographic information provided a detailed description of the participants who volunteered to participate Survey Monkey survey. The reasoning for not being enrolled in higher education varied in scale by: I don't have time, I don't know how to apply for a degree or program, I wouldn't be able to with family obligation, I'm not interested in higher education, and I don't feel I need higher education (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

The Research Study Participants' Reasoning for Not Being Enrolled in Higher Education

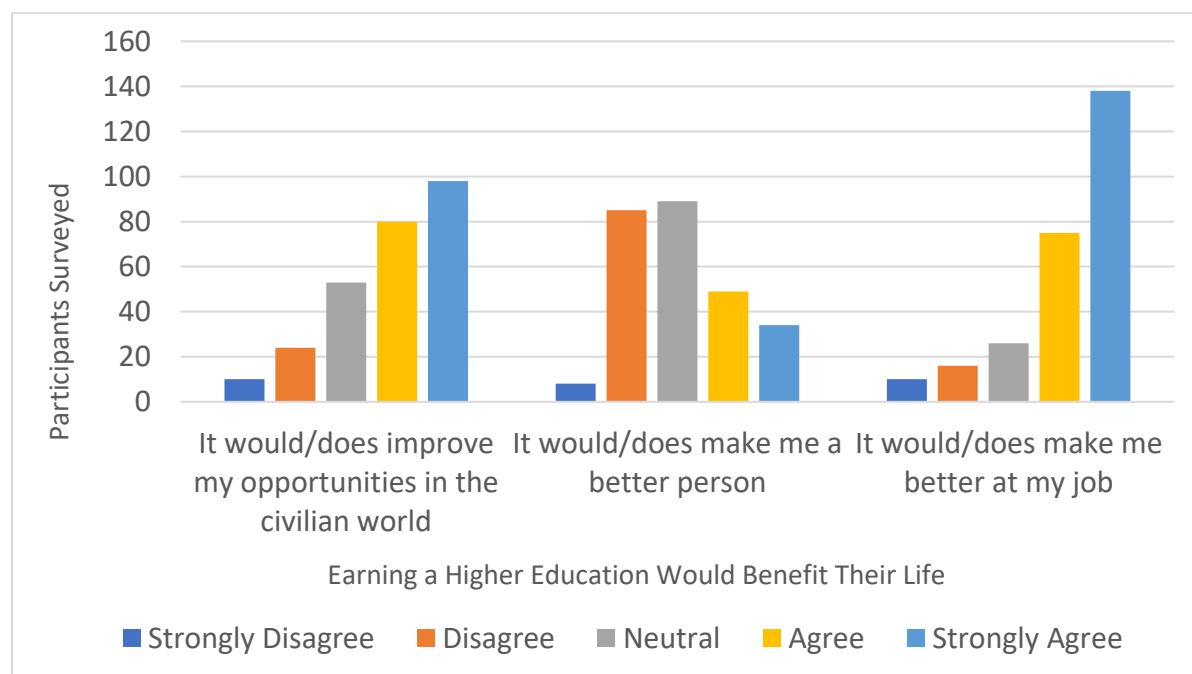


Note. The column graph depicts the various reasonings why participants are not enrolled in higher education.

Of the 265 participants involved in the Survey Monkey survey, the reasoning reflected variance from the composition of the larger organizations of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The research participant's belief that earning a higher education degree would benefit their life with ranges from: it would education improve opportunities in the civilian world, made them a better person, and made them better at their job (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

The Research Study Participants' Earning a Higher Education Would Benefit Their Life

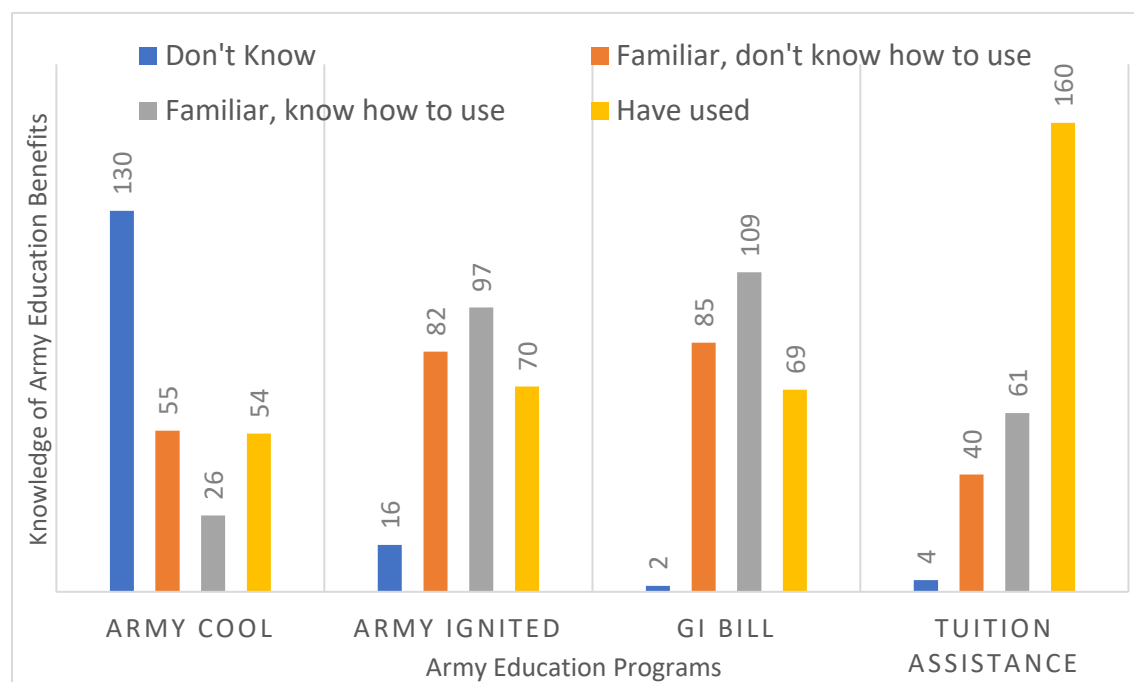


Note. The column graph depicts the research participant's belief that pursuing higher education benefit their life.

Of the 265 participants involved in the study, the knowledge and use of Army education benefits reflected variance from the composition of the larger organizations of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The research participant's knowledge or Army education benefits attained ranged from: I don't know about this benefit, familiar, don't know how to use, familiar, know how to use and have used for Army COOL, Army IgnitED, the GI Bill, and Tuition Assistance (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

The Research Study Participants' Knowledge of Army Education Benefits

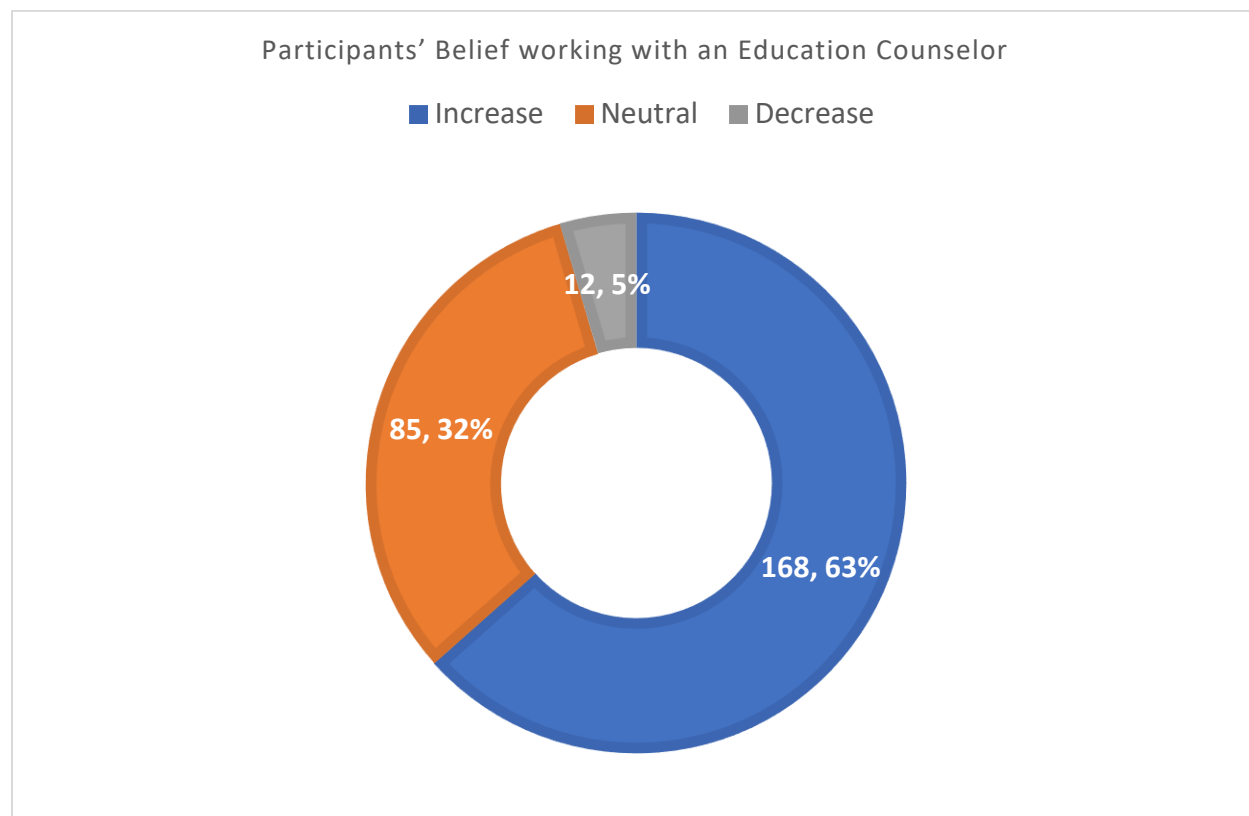


Note. The column graph depicts the research participant's knowledge and use of a variety of Army education benefits.

Of the 265 participants involved in the study who have utilized the Fort Benning Education Center reflected variance from the composition of the larger organizations of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers within the 2-54 Infantry Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment. The research participants acknowledged if they have utilized the Fort Benning Education Center and if that experience was beneficial or not (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

The Research Study Participants' Use of the Fort Benning Education Center



Note. The pie graph depicts the research participant's use of the Fort Benning Education Center.

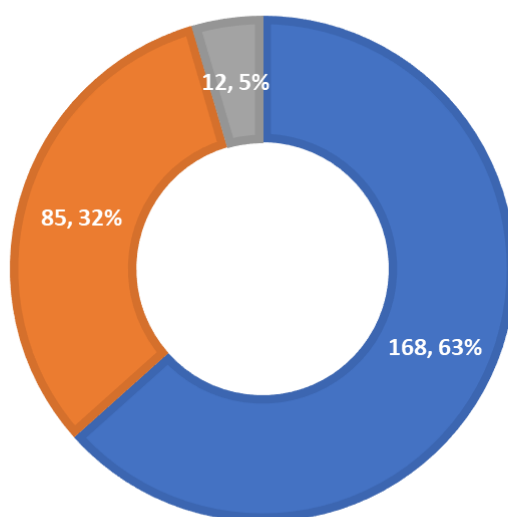
Of the 265 participants involved in the study 168 believed that having an assigned Education Counselor would increase their desire to pursue college education or professional advancement. The research participants rated their belief that working with an Education Counselor would impact their desire for college education or professional development with a scale of Increase, Decrease, or Remain Neutral (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

The Research Study Participants' Belief working with an Education Counselor would Increase, Decrease, or Remain Neutral their Desire for College Education or Professional Advancement

Participants' Belief working with an Education Counselor

■ Increase ■ Neutral ■ Decrease



Note. The pie graph depicts the research participant's belief that working with an Education Counselor would Increase, Decrease, or Remain Neutral their Desire for College Education or Professional Advancement.

Interview Results

Through the data review and analysis, four themes were identified as challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experienced when pursuing higher education and using their education benefits in furthering their education. The four-themes included: (1) challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experience with the work commitment and lack of free time in their schedule, (2) Army education benefits are only covered during their time in basic training

and not again in their career, (3) lack of communication and the flow of communication when it comes to available education opportunities, and (4) the diminishing determination enlisted noncommissioned officers have when it comes to continuing their higher education. The four themes presented in this qualitative study provided a more holistic understanding and approach to enlisted noncommissioned officers experience to using their education benefits and pursuing higher education while on active-duty (see Table 1).

Table 1

Emerging Themes

Theme Number	Theme on Higher Education and Army Education benefits
1	Work commitment and lack of free time as active-duty soldiers
2	Education benefits are only covered during basic training
3	Lack of communication flow when it comes to available education opportunities
4	Determination to continue with higher education once started

Four Major Themes of the Study

The one-on-one interview questions (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8) focused on education benefits, knowledge of them, and roadblocks to pursuing higher education this resulted in four major themes (see Table 2). Throughout the one-on-one interviews, the themes that consistently were brought up were the challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experienced when trying use their education benefits, work schedule management, allowing for informational sessions on education benefits and balancing life in pursuing higher education while being on active-duty.

Table 2*One-on-One Interview Questions*

Question Number	One-on-One Interview Question
1	Are you aware of Tuition Assistance (TA) benefits? What do you know generally about the benefits?
3	Are you aware of GI Bill benefits? Please describe what you know.
4	What has your experience been with the Fort Benning Education Center?
6	Does the idea of working with an Education Counselor increase, decrease, or remain neutral your desire for college education or professional advancement?
7	What is your biggest barrier to taking college classes?
8	Does your education level match the educational requirements for civilians working in equivalent positions in your MOS/industry?

Theme 1: Work commitment and lack of free time as active-duty soldiers

The first theme was consistent across interviews were the challenge enlisted active-duty noncommissioned officers face when wanting to pursue higher education. The notion of time challenges and lack of time within the participants work schedule reoccurred 142 times amongst the 52 interviewed participants. PART184 noted, “We could be working on homework when all the tasks for the day are complete that way you go home no waiting around.” PART15 said, “I found it challenging to commit to want to start school when there is an influx of my job tasks, minimal staffing, and constant training events.” Eleven interview participants noted that the ever-changing Army mission kept them from pursuing their higher education due to the unknown. PART205 said, “In this unit we don’t have enough time to take courses, because we train for the mission first, people second.” PART151 also stated, “As an enlisted soldier, most of my

career is in a *Line* unit, which meant I spent a great deal of time in field training environments without access to the basic items for college.” PART07 stated, “It was difficult to schedule classes due to a rapidly changing training cycle extended time in the field training soldiers, that planning for school was not a high item on my priority list.” PART49 said, “The constant mission interfered with attending classes in the evening and the unit Operational Tempo (OPTEMPO) made wanting to attend classes difficult.”

Other perspectives developed from the one-on-one interviews were from PART208, PART51, and PART98. Their common perspective was the increased importance for civilian higher education amongst the enlisted noncommissioned soldiers and the pressure to continue their education to rate higher on promotion lists. PART208 stated, “I never really thought about college or the need to seek education after high school or even after I enlisted. But that attitude and priorities have changed; I realize how important getting a degree can better me as a person.” PART51 noted “The Army is placing more importance on higher education than other parts of being a soldier but still doesn’t allow for extra time to do it.” PART98 explained “Allowing time for higher education studies, at the end the duty day when all the days tasks are complete would help with time management.” PART208 also noted “Free time that may not benefit the organization’s mission but would benefit my personal professional develop in and out of the military shows the Army cares about its people.” The final commonality of perceptions developed from interview questions 1 and 10 pursuing higher education in the military can be exceedingly difficult because of balancing your entire obligation to the unit you are assigned and the military school you must attend. All 52 participants mentioned in their interviews that the balance of military deployment, field training exercises, and better calendars to allow for educational pursuits. Participants cited interview question one, that the lack of available time

outside of military obligations is a leading cause of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers pursuing their higher education beyond a high school diploma.

Theme 2: Education benefits are only covered during basic training

Another theme that consistently emerged throughout the interviews was the lack of knowledge of Army education benefits. Items like tuition assistance (TA), credentialing assistance (CA), the GI Bill, and Army IgnitED (formerly Go Army Ed) were briefly covered during the 10-week basic training. PART101 stated “We only really hear about education during basic and never hear about it again; I don’t know how to begin using TA or other services.” PART207 recalled “We need more and in-depth information about all available education outlets. If the Army wants us to use these programs.”

PART 34 mentioned “the only briefs that I know of regarding education are only offered when you are entering or departing the Army.” PART56 emphasized “ You don’t have anyone speak about and teach you how to use all of the Education benefits and programs the Army offers unless you go out of your way to seek it out.” PART13 continued with the notion of education awareness. “It would be beneficial to bring someone in for one day a month, in order to explore educational opportunities and resources would allow and encourage us to understand and utilize the educational and professional opportunities that are available besides the first few months we’re in the Army” (PART13). “There is so much happening within those military briefs that you don’t retain anything, you’re just trying to stay awake” (PART13). “Plus, half of the education benefits that are spoken about in basic training briefs are not information privates need because if they were to use the benefits, it would be later in their career” (PART13). Education benefits and how to use these benefits would have a higher participation if active-duty soldiers had specialized education support and training.

PART26 explained “Give soldiers the knowledge of these programs; no one knows they exist so they don't know how to use them.” 50% of interviewed participants stressed that they would utilize their education benefits if they knew about them. A brief overview of the Army’s education benefits is covered at the very beginning of an enlisted soldier’s career. The participants in this study are enlisted noncommissioned officers who have been in the Army more than four years. The final commonality of participants cited in interview that the lack of counseling or advising services not readily available is a leading cause of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers pursuing their higher education beyond a high school diploma.

Theme 3: Lack of communication flow when it comes to available education opportunities

The third theme that consistently emerged throughout the interviews was the lack of awareness when it came to available educational opportunities enlisted active-duty soldiers could partake in. PART193 stated “There is no emphasize educational and vocational programs.” PART205 mentioned “information on education opportunities needs to be provided so that it gets disseminated to the lowest level; the opportunities are there but not everyone knows how to use them.” The perception that the Army provides education benefits, but active-duty soldiers do not know how to access the information was prevalent in statements by 31 participants during the one-on-one interviews. PART71 echoed the same sentiment of “Needing to inform older soldiers of the educational opportunities and stop explaining education as something you can do when you get out of the Army; all soldiers regardless of rank or duty position should have the opportunity to continue their education.”

One participant mentioned that constant communication to soldiers gives much more flexibility when scheduling time to pursue education (PART13). PART13 indicated, “The biggest challenges are feeling like you’re missing out on something that could change your life

without even knowing it.” The commonality of perceptions cited by 37 of the 52 participants in the interview question not being able explore educational opportunities and resources that would allow and encourage them to understand and utilize the educational and professional was because they do not know where to begin. This was a main theme that hindered enlisted noncommissioned officers from pursuing their higher education beyond a high school diploma.

Theme 4: Determination to continue with higher education once started

The final theme prominent amongst the one-on-one interview participants was enlisted noncommissioned officers’ commitment, focus, and concentration to take college classes to pursue higher education while on active-duty. A representative comment from 45 of the 52 participants (86%) noted their experiences on committing, focusing, and concentrating on taking college classes to pursue higher education on while being on active-duty was important to their career and would benefit them after their military service had ended. PART146 noted, “The desire to finish a college degree comes from earning additional promotion points and the future promotion potential inside and outside the military.” PART100 stated, “For the promotion board and for promotion points, the Army only sees the degree that is what matters, that pushes me to want to continue with my education.”

PART169 and PART254 identified an essential attitude of having determination of obtaining a degree. PART169 noted, “Having a degree builds optimism and resilience and show soldiers you can achieve your goal.” PART254 stated, “Increase education knowledge, increase confidence, and increase likelihood of success Pursuing higher education can result in quicker promotion, increase pay, and better leadership positions.” Additionally, comments from 49 of the 52 participants (94%), who participated in the interview, had a general view that committing to a degree would benefit them throughout their life. The following comments represent 25% of the

52 online survey respondents. These comments used to describe enlisted noncommissioned officers desire and commitment to want to pursue post-secondary education. 43 of interviewed participants thought that continue determination to overcome factors in their life was an important attribute for enlisted noncommissioned officers on active-duty to pursue their higher education beyond a high school diploma.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided an analysis of the data collected during the qualitative research study. The study included an analysis of the online Survey Monkey survey questions and the one-on-one interview questions. The data collection process began to conduct this research study began after receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The initial set of data collected was from the 265 participants who participated in the online, 11 question survey. The final set of data collected was the participants' informed consent, email, and one-on-one interview transcripts. Each one-on-one interview was audio-recorded and transcribed using a free online software Otter, prior to sending the transcribed audio-recording to each of the 52 participants for validation. Based on the data collected from the online Survey Monkey survey and one-on-one interview, four major themes emerged and were identified based on the eight research questions.

The primary research question identified two of the four major themes. The remaining five research questions identified the remaining two major themes. The first commonality of perceptions that emerged from the participants was the challenges of trying to balance their active-duty military obligation, the work-life balance, and family relationships. This commonality of perceptions developed from interview questions 1 and 10 pursuing higher education in the military can be exceedingly difficult because of balancing your entire obligation

to the unit you are assigned and the military school you must attend. All 52 participants mentioned in their interviews that the balance of military deployment, field training exercises, and better calendars to allow for educational pursuits.

The second commonality of perceptions cited by half of the interviewed participants was that the Army's education benefits need to have a larger representation throughout their career and primarily when they're entering or exiting active-duty. The final commonality of participants cited in interview that the lack of counseling or advising services not readily available is a leading cause of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers pursuing their higher education beyond a high school diploma. Participants cited in interview that the lack of counseling or advising services not readily available to the enlisted noncommissioned officer ranks. The theme emerged to answer RQ3 and RQ5.

The third commonality of perception is that the Army provides education benefits, but active-duty soldiers do not know how to access the information was prevalent in statements by 31 participants during the one-on-one interviews. Cited by 37 of the 52 participants in the interview question not being able explore educational opportunities and resources that would allow and encourage them to understand and utilize the educational and professional was because they do not know where to begin. The theme emerged to answer the RQ1.

The fourth commonality of perceptions cited by 26 of the 52 participants in the online survey questionnaire connected accomplishment and future success to enlisted active-duty noncommissioned officers to pursue higher education beyond a high school diploma. A representative comment from 45 of the 52 participants (86%) noted their experiences on committing, focusing, and concentrating on taking college classes to pursue higher education on

while being on active-duty was important to their career and would benefit them after their military service had ended. The theme emerged to answer the RQ2.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings of the study, the results from the six themes captured from the one-on-one interview, and online Survey Monkey survey. Chapter 5 also identified limitations of the study, recommendations to leaders and education personnel, and recommendations for future research to support active-duty enlisted noncommissioned soldiers in pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the qualitative grounded theory research study explored the interpretations and meanings active-duty enlisted soldiers attached to their lived experiences as military students seeking higher education beyond a high school diploma. The study employed a grounded theory research design approach to understand the active-duty enlisted soldier's points of view, their interpretations, and their meanings to their lived experiences in pursuing post-secondary education. Chapter 5 includes the research questions, supplemental research questions, discussion of findings from the data collected, and limitations identified within the research study and the integration of relevant literature. Recommendations to leaders, practitioners and for future research study in military enlisted soldiers pursuing post-secondary education and Army education benefit awareness are presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 included a summary of active-duty enlisted soldiers pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma.

Table 3

Recommendation from the Results of the Study

Results	Recommendations
Education benefits being briefed during the initial ten-weeks of an enlisted noncommissioned officer's career and not covered formally again	Improve communication and interaction amongst Army leadership, installation education centers, and servicemembers.
Tuition assistance, how to use it and the details of the benefit	Provide information to active-duty enlisted soldiers about tuition assistance benefits.
Credentialing assistance, how to use it and the details of the benefit	Provide information to active-duty enlisted soldiers about the use of the credentialing assistance program.
Communication failures when it comes to the available education opportunities available	Provide information briefing to active-duty enlisted soldiers about the value of commitment to improving soldier skills.
The importance of needing a college degree and professional development for advancement	Improve communication and interaction between Army leaderships and active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers about the steps to pursue higher education.

Note. Recommendations for all leaders and practitioners in higher education to consider from the results of the research study.

Research Questions

The researcher used the following research questions and supplementary questions to understand the pursuit of higher education among active-duty enlisted soldiers to guide this grounded theory research study:

RQ: What do active-duty soldiers indicate hinders them from pursuing higher education?

SRQ1: Are there career advancement advantages or disadvantages of obtaining higher education?

SRQ2: Would having a specialized education counselor increase or decrease the desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ3: Does having access to an on-post education center provide an increase or decrease in desire to obtain higher education?

SRQ4: What is the active-duty soldiers' awareness of the education benefits?

SRQ5: What is the active-duty soldiers' attitude towards higher education?

Interpretation of the Findings

The online Survey Monkey survey results and the one-on-one interviews indicated several factors that influenced active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers when it comes to pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma. Factors were soldiers' obligation to the unit, lack of knowledge of education benefits, time management, communication disconnect, and acknowledgement of the significant influences that come along with soldiers pursuing higher education. Other factors that influenced active-duty enlisted soldiers' pursuit of higher education

were a reward for achievement, determination, and personal obligations. The discussion findings explored these factors connected with the following four emergent themes identified in this research study.

- Challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experience when trying to pursue higher education while on active duty
- Using education benefits in pursuing higher education on active duty
- Time management and balancing life in pursuing higher education while on active duty
- Focus and determination to take college course and earn a college degree while on active duty

Thematic Comparison and Contrast

The four thematic themes were based on the lived experiences and perceptions of 52 interviewees and 265 surveyed who participated in this research while pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma. The study's findings included new information from the participant's point of view that might fill the gap regarding why active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers are not completing a college degree at a higher rate. Subsequently, the results of the study are discussed with references to relevant literature.

Theme 1: Work commitment and lack of free time as active-duty soldiers

The first theme that emerged from the interviews is the challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers experience in pursuing higher education while on active duty. 41 of the 52 participants (79%) noted they experienced many challenges in attending college while serving on active duty. Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers recognized many encouraging factors for obtaining a higher education within the Army, like tuition benefits, and

education programs. However, leadership encouragement, communication disconnects, no situational awareness of benefits were negative factors when it came to allowing soldiers to pursue and obtain a college degree. According to the U.S. Department of the Army (2017), allowing active-duty enlisted soldiers to pursue and attain post-secondary education will provide the possibility of soldiers acquiring those critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to accomplish future Army missions.

However, the major obstacle that hinders soldiers from obtaining a college degree is the unit mission's and enlisted noncommissioned officer's obligation. Of the 265 active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers 262 participants (99%), voiced their perception that rapid military deployment, unit field training exercises, and military life presented significant challenges to them in pursuing and completing a college degree. Wahl (2016) acknowledged the difficulty of getting a college degree on active duty but recognized that a college degree is a critical component to future success in the armed forces and the civilian world. However, the views differ significantly on the best course of action to get the active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers ranks the needed post-secondary education and support. Eleven of the 12 participants (92%) noted that time management and balancing family life were some of the biggest obstacles they encountered in pursuing post-secondary education.

The enlisted noncommissioned officers who participated in this study acknowledged military training, unit field exercises, and deployment duty always make up a crucial part of their hesitance to pursue higher education. However, the interview participants also recognized that balancing family life would also require them to sacrifice time to pursue higher education while on active-duty. According to the U.S. Department of the Army (2014), "one of the misunderstandings of 169 soldiers pursuing higher education is the mission requirements placed

on active-duty enlisted soldiers in performing their duties in the field.” According to Layne (2008), “if universities and colleges had a better understanding of all the challenges soldiers face in balancing military work requirements and family life, it might help reduce the low rate of attaining a four-year degree among enlisted soldiers.”

Future qualitative researchers should explore the best course of action of how active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers can pursue and obtain their college degree while performing all the military obligations associated with accomplishing the Army’s mission. The manner which the participants strongly agreed to these factors indicated they viewed earning a post-secondary degree as nearly impossible while being on active-duty; this was supported by literature which pertained to problems military personnel face when pursuing higher education (Stewart, 1989).

Theme 2: Education benefits are only covered during basic training

The second theme that emerged from the interviews and the Survey Monkey survey is how to use education benefits and the correlated assistance needed to pursue higher education while on active duty. Thirty of the fifty-two participants (58%) noted that using tuition assistance (TA) would be a key factor in pursuing post-secondary education if they knew about the monetary allocations and the process to apply for it. Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers viewed the military education benefits as one of the best programs the Army has to offer in support of pursuing a college degree. An introductory briefing of the Army’s education programs is given with enlisted soldiers are in the beginning of their military careers in basic training.

During this ten-week process, soldiers are indoctrinated with the Army's systems, policies, and procedures when it comes to being on active-duty. An overview of the coverage of the military education programs and benefits are not touched on in a formal manner again during a noncommissioned officer's career. The Army viewed "supporting active-duty enlisted soldiers in attaining higher education as critical to the Army vision of providing active-duty enlisted soldiers with higher cognitive skills to fight and win in the next military conflict" (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017).

Based on the participant's perceived value within the study, future qualitative researchers could explore how best the Army can increase the tuition assistance to help active-duty enlisted soldiers pursue and obtain a college degree. The participant responses directly aligned with literature pertaining to the relationship between enlisted soldiers' awareness and use of educational benefits and their decisions (Drake, 2002).

Theme 3: Lack of communication flow when it comes to available education opportunities

The finding of the third theme that emerged from the interviews is the lack of communication of available education opportunities. Thirty-seven of the 52 participants (71%) noted not being able explore educational opportunities and resources. Making these benefits known would encourage active-duty servicemembers to utilize their resources because they do not know where to begin.

Based upon available literature, making active-duty servicemembers aware of education benefits is an ongoing challenge. However, many of the participants noted that information on education opportunities is not being disseminated to the lowest level. Available opportunities are relayed to higher ranking officers or noncommissioned officers and are not making their way to

the rest of the formation. As a result, participants believed a substantial stressor would be relieved from enlisted servicemembers if commands, Education Centers, and colleges communicated more frequently and coordinated their schedules. To understand when the most opportune time for enlisted noncommissioned officers to take classes. Some participants also felt that intentional coordination would assist Education Counselors to understand education needs based on the demands of those schedules.

Although, coordinated schedules and trainings may be in place at other military installations, participants are not experiencing this at Fort Benning. This theme reinforced the conclusions arrived at by Brown (2014), who recognized student success appeared to increase when an Education Centers engaged with enlisted servicemembers to develop expedited delivery methods to accommodate active-duty schedules. By increasing the engagement among battalion leadership, Education Centers, and enlisted servicemembers, it is possible that many of the issues pertaining to “benefit awareness” identified in this research would be mitigated. Increased dialogue between servicemembers, battalion leadership and education stakeholders would serve to increase awareness amongst all parties involved.

Theme 4: Determination to continue with higher education once started

The finding of the fourth theme that emerged from the one-on-one interviews and the online Survey Monkey survey was the participant’s determination to stay the course to obtain a college degree while on active-duty. Thirty-nine of the 52 interviewed participants (75%) noted that enlisted noncommissioned officer face many challenges in their drive to complete coursework and remain engaged in post-secondary education while serving on active-duty. The one commonality cited by the thirty-nine interviewed participants was that believing in their ability to accomplish tasks, being more marketable after the military, and self-confidence as

critical aspects in pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma. Forty of the 12 participants (77%) noted the importance of drive and determination in obtaining their college degree while on active duty.

Thirty-five of the 52 survey participants, 67% thought determination was an essential attribute to enlisted soldiers to pursue higher education beyond a high school diploma. According to Maslow (1970), the seventh stage of the Hierarchy of Needs is self-actualization. The notion that servicemembers have the self-actualization to understand that determination is a key factor when it comes to continuing or pausing their education goals was prevalent in this study. Based on participant's perceived value within the study, future qualitative research would gauge the feeling and interpretation of one's determination related to enlisted noncommissioned officers' willingness to pursuing higher education, use their education benefits, and obtaining their college degree.

Implications for Practice

The researcher started the literature review by presenting the obstacles that were inherent amongst active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers seeking post-secondary degrees. Within this study, post-secondary degrees included an associates, a bachelor's, or a master's earned from a college or university while serving on active-duty. The literature enhanced the importance of servicemembers to pursue higher education to obtain higher education degree. The recommendations were developed based on literature review from the following research: Drake, (2002); English, (2021); Kem and Hotaling, (2017); Layne, (2009); Ming, (2014); Stewart, (1989); Ramirez, (2018); and Wenger, Miller, Baird, and Buryk, (2017). The current study offers several recommendations to mitigate challenges enlisted noncommissioned officers wanting to pursue higher education. The recommendations provided insights for Army leaders and Army

Educational Institutions to refine their policies, procedures, and resources to enhance soldiers' education opportunities. Based on the study's findings, five recommendations are offered to increase the likelihood of enlisted soldier's success when pursuing higher education.

Recommendation 1: Improve communication and interaction amongst Army leadership, installation education centers, and servicemembers. Establish better communication and interaction to identify issues hindering active-duty enlisted soldiers from starting, continuing, and completing their college degrees. Possible forums to facilitate communication and interaction among or is it Army leadership, installation education center, and servicemembers includes annual training from the education center counselors to each battalion to inform the servicemembers on their education benefits, how to use them, and steps to receive assistance. The installation garrison Commander and garrison command Segreant Major would mandate these trainings to each brigade command team and the education center for scheduling. Using these annual trainings allows the Army leaders, education centers, and servicemembers to opportunity to discuss the challenges and solutions to improving enlisted soldiers' college experience.

Recommendation 2: Provide information to active-duty enlisted soldiers about tuition assistance benefits. Army leaders should be informing their active-duty enlisted soldiers about tuition assistance benefits and the impact of participating in continuing education, career advancement, and future job potentials. Active-duty enlisted soldiers' benefits include being promoted faster, increased pay with promotions, and education without debt. Battalion structured forums that provide information include increase the overall awareness of their education benefits. These forums should be done annually at a minimum with a focus on professional development military schools to increase the participant pool. Using the existing professional

development schools and leadership driven battalion forums reach every enlisted soldier about their education benefits and the use of tuition assistance.

Recommendation 3: Provide information to active-duty enlisted soldiers about the use of the credentialing assistance program. Enlisted soldiers' awareness of credentialing assistance is dismal. Army leaders and education center personnel need to place an emphasis on the importance of credentialing assistance and the benefits earning certificates and trades could benefit the force now and the individual servicemember in the future. Similar to the approach of spreading awareness of tuition assistance with battalion and garrison command teams driven forums, the same structure would increase the knowledge and use of credentialing assistance.

Recommendation 4: Provide information briefing to active-duty enlisted soldiers about the value of commitment to improving soldier skills. Army leaders' emphasis the Army's people first values. The commitment to the professional career advancement is a primary factor when it comes to active-duty enlisted soldiers. The benefits that come along with the focus on career advancement is an increased leadership role, promotions, pay increases, and participation in military leadership schools. However, the emphasis of higher education advancement is not prioritized as highly as military leadership courses. Army leaders need to place the same level of attention on degree completion and educational advancement when it comes to serving in leadership roles. The potential combination of college credit and military leadership schools would allow for enlisted soldiers to earn college credit for the completion of these courses.

Bringing in professionals from the world of academia to continue to elevate with military courses will allow of enlisted noncommissioned officers the added benefit of earning college credit while excelling in their military career. The American Council for Education (ACE) evaluate and determine the number of academic credits soldiers can earn from their military

service and schooling. Many colleges and universities accept credits from servicemembers' Joint Service Transcript (JST), which houses all their ACE accredited college credits and military training. The combination of adding an educational component to these military professional development and leadership schools and ACE college credits would improve the transfer of credits that would reduce the time required of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers to earn their post-secondary degrees. However, most of the military training transfer as electives, colleges and universities should reevaluate their transfer equivalencies.

Recommendation 5: Improve communication and interaction between Army leaderships and active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers about the steps to pursue higher education. Establishing a better communication and interaction channel between Army leaders and enlisted noncommissioned officers about the importance of continuing education, the benefits, and steps on how to use them to align to not only the Army's focus of people first but the servicemembers future opportunities.

Participating in higher education is beneficial to enlisted noncommissioned because it increases their critical thinking, problem-solving, and time management skills. These soft skills are valuable for being leaders in the Army and after noncommissioned officers' transition out of active-duty service. The Army and Army leadership need to place an emphasis on promoting education benefits and available opportunities to their soldiers. Army leaders need to focus on the holistic well-being of their servicemember and the lucrative opportunities awarded to them while they serve in active-duty. These education opportunities and benefits would be discussed on a bi-monthly basis if added to the Army Career Advancement Model. The Career Advancement Model shows the servicemember every military school, training, and professional development they should be obtaining at each rank based on their Military Occupational Specialty.

The Career Advancement Model is a tool that provides the Army the ability to coach, and mentor enlisted soldiers a guideline on where they should be at each level of their career. The addition of civilian education to the Career Advancement Model would provide a servicemember with a timeframe of when they should be starting and completing their civilian higher education. Using the Career Advancement Model allows for MOS's across the Army to be hitting the same milestones and engaging a wider number of enlisted soldiers to pursue higher education and professional development.

Implications for Theory and Research

Future inquiry is recommended to investigate college degree attainment and retention amongst active-duty enlisted soldiers with an emphasis on noncommissioned officers who are closer to transition out of the military based on qualitative methodologies. Recommendations for future research might consider conducting phenomenological research focusing exclusively on enlisted noncommissioned officers who completed their college degrees while on active-duty. The research participants cited time management, communication disconnect, ignorance of education benefits, and determination as factors that halted them from continue their education and completing their college degree. However, the belief that their life would benefit positively from higher education and a college degree was evident in the participants survey and interview responses. The findings serve to validate best practices currently in place or help identify ways those active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers that were able to complete their academic degrees while on active-duty. Future inquiry is recommended to focus on active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers use of tuition and credentialing assistance.

Recommendations for future research should consider conducting qualitative program assessments focusing exclusively on the utilization of tuition and credentialing assistance for the

active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officer ranks. This research study uncovered those participants that failed to use credentialing assistance benefits provided to them by the Army. The utilization rate of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers using credentialing assistance was 52%. The study's participants identified tuition assistance as playing a significant part in their drives to obtaining a college degree with a familiarization of 98% and utilization rate of 83%.

The program assessment design allowed the researcher to evaluate a servicemembers or knowledge of education benefits and use that to measure the actual education program outcomes against its intended results. The yield from the findings might serve to help Army leaders and servicemembers develop policies and procedures that could be used to aid active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers utilizing education benefits such as tuition or credentialing assistance and obtaining a degree while serving on active-duty. Future inquiry is recommended to focus on transitioned enlisted noncommissioned officers' career advancements because of utilizing their education benefits while on active-duty. Recommendations for future research might consider conducting qualitative action research focusing exclusively on the participants desired career goals and its association with using their education benefits.

Implications for P-20

This study featured a variety of implications on the P-20 education model with a focus in innovation, implementation, diversity, and leadership. Active-duty military servicemembers fall within the unique structure of P-20 due to its emphasis on a continual building of education from preschool to life-long learning. This study explored the unique challenges servicemembers face when trying to promote their higher education while utilizing their entitled employment

education entitlements. The Army would benefit from implementing the various recommendations in this study to encourage the P-20 model of continuous learning.

The Army has a touchpoint of thousands of servicemembers that would have direct implications on the generations of citizens. The connection between P-20 education and the Army's attempt to educate their soldiers can be modeled by other organizations. Enlisted noncommissioned officers are diverse in nature, promote unique leadership skills, and are at the cutting edge of innovation to meet the enemies of our country. By remodeling the Army's education benefits and processes, other higher learning organizations would benefit from their impact.

Limitations

To conduct this study, the researcher acknowledged several limitations. Therefore, this study was limited in its scope in several areas. The study was limited to soldiers in the U.S. Army. Participants were limited to soldiers who do not traditionally enter active-duty with a college degree. Data was not collected from servicemembers from other military branches. The study was limited exclusively to active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers. The study did not include enlisted soldiers from the ranks of E8- Master Sergeant or E9- Sergeant Major. An additional limitation was that participants contacted might not have been willing to complete the interview on time with their work obligations, which may have hindered the results and timeline for participation.

Summary

The goal of this research study was to explore the lack of knowledge and use of Army education benefits and identify any roadblocks active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers are encountering in their pursuit of higher education beyond a high school diploma. The

qualitative, grounded theory research study revealed several themes, including an obligation to the unit, military deployment and field training exercises, lack of time management skills, lack of time management on behalf of leadership, underuse, or lack of knowledge of education benefits as significant influencers of soldiers wanting to pursue higher education. This study's data collection consisted of the online Survey Monkey survey and in person one-on-one interviews. The use of a QDAS program, CAQDAS, assisted with analyzing the data resulting in four themes to answer one primary research question (RQ) and five supplemental research questions (SRQ). One theme emerged that answered the primary RQ, one theme emerged that answered SRQ1, one theme emerged that answered SRQ2 and SQ3, and one theme emerged that answered SRQ4. Data collected to answer the primary RQ indicated challenges enlisted soldiers experience in pursuing higher education, the lack of familiarity and utilization of tuition and credentialing assistance, time management, and lack of communication from leadership and education centers.

One common thread that hinders the soldiers the most in obtaining a college degree is enlisted noncommissioned officers work obligation to their respective organization or unit's mission. 100% of interviewed participants voiced their perception that military deployment, field training exercises, and military work imbalance presented significant challenges to them pursuing and obtaining a college degree. Another common thread identified through the interview was tuition and credentialing assistance. 50% of interviewed participants stressed that they would utilize their education benefits if they knew about them. Using tuition and credentialing assistance was a key factor in pursuing college education. The last reported tuition assistance usage among soldiers was at 38.1% was from the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2014.

Another common thread from primary RQ was time management and work-life balance in the pursuit of higher education. All 52 participants mentioned in their interviews that the balance of military deployment, field training exercises, and better calendars to allow for educational pursuits. Participants surveyed noted, that the lack of available time outside of military obligations is a leading cause of active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers pursuing their higher education beyond a high school diploma (82%). One final thread surfaced in the survey results was the importance of achieving higher education would improve their opportunities in the civilian world (67%) and it would make me better at their job (80%). Forty-six percent of surveyed participants noted their current education does not meet their employment needs. Participants answered SRQ1 in that taking college classes to pursue higher education while serving on active duty was needed for current and future career progression.

Data collected to answer SRQ2 and SRQ3 indicated the importance education centers and education counselors play in the education benefit awareness and usage amongst noncommissioned officers. The education centers are meant to serve as centralized locations housed with the most up to date information and subject matter efforts. Participants in the online Survey Monkey survey and one-on-one interviews indicated both education centers are underutilized (68%). The flow of information of education benefits would increase if education counselors were a fixated in the battalion structure per results from participants in the online survey (95%).

SRQ4 was answered from data collected from participant emergent theme of noncommissioned officers not being aware of education benefits such as tuition and credentialing assistance and how to use the programs. Data collected to answer SRQ5 indicated active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers' attitude and determination in achieving a college

degree. A representative comment from 45 of the 52 participants (86%) noted their experiences on committing, focusing, and concentrating on taking college classes to pursue higher education on while being on active-duty was important to their career and would benefit them after their military service had ended. Forty-three of interviewed participants thought that continue determination to overcome factors in their life was an important attribute for enlisted noncommissioned officers on active-duty to pursue their higher education beyond a high school diploma.

The study has contributed to the body of knowledge by addressing shortfalls active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers face when pursuing higher education beyond a high school diploma and utilizing their education benefits. The need for higher education amongst servicemembers is at the highest it has been in the Army's past. Promotion points and promotion lists have placed a higher weight standing on civilian education than overseas military deployments. The Army is facing a new journey when it comes to retaining noncommissioned officers when a battle is not currently being waged. If the Army plans to keep their fighting force and leaders, emphasis must be placed on removing barriers that hinder enlisted servicemembers from pursuing higher education benefits. In doing so, the Army will have a noncommissioned officers force that is equipped in critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the time management needed to continue with the Army's core value of "loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage" (MLDC 2009).

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board

328 Wells Hall
Murray, KY 42071-3318
270-809-2916 • msu.ibr@murraystate.edu

TO: Justin Brogan, Educational Studies Leadership and Counseling

FROM: Jonathan Baskin, IRB Coordinator 

DATE: 10/13/2022

RE: Human Subjects Protocol I.D. – IRB # 23-043

The IRB has completed its review of your student's Level 1 protocol entitled *Higher Education Awareness Amongst Noncommissioned Officers in the United States Army*. After review and consideration, the IRB has determined that the research, as described in the protocol form, will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University guidelines for the protection of human participants.

The forms and materials that have been approved for use in this research study are attached to the email containing this letter. These are the forms and materials that must be presented to the subjects. Use of any process or forms other than those approved by the IRB will be considered misconduct in research as stated in the MSU IRB Procedures and Guidelines section 20.3.

Your stated data collection period is from 10/13/2022 to 5/31/2023.

If data collection extends beyond this period, please submit an Amendment to an Approved Protocol form detailing the new data collection period and the reason for the change.

This Level 1 approval is valid until 10/12/2023.

If data collection and analysis extends beyond this date, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, 10/12/2023. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available at murraystate.edu/ibr). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision prior to your expiration date, or your research must stop until such time that IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, then a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for IRB review so that your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork in a timely manner.

The protocol is approved. You may begin data collection now.

**Opportunity
afforded**

murraystate.edu

Appendix B

Army Regulation 621-5

C-3. Educational interests survey

a. Demographic data. Request information about the people responding:

(1) Are the respondents military (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard) or civilian (veteran, adult family member, Army Civilian, government contractor, other)? If respondents are military, determine their pay grade and whether they are RA, a member of the RC, or retired. If the respondents are civilians, are they employed full time, part time, or not presently employed?

(2) Ask the respondents their highest level of education completed (some high school, GED, alternative credential like home schooling, high school graduate, some college work, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, professional degree or doctoral degree).

(3) Determine how much longer the respondents expect to remain at your location (1 year or less, 2 years, 3 years, 4 years, or more than 4 years).

(4) Ask the respondents their age (under 20, 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–54, or 55 and older).

b. Army Continuing Education System programs. In this section, ask a few questions about the respondent's current participation in ACES' programs and their educational and professional goals.

(1) Determine whether the respondent has participated in an ACES program.

(2) Ask which Army voluntary education programs they have participated in during the last 12 months (for example, HSC or GED Test, FAST, in-classroom college course, online college course, NCO Leader Development Course, STC, unit training classes, ESL program, counseling, testing, or other).

(3) What is their primary reason for participating in ACES programs? Some examples: to achieve my academic goals, to prepare for retirement to acquire a civilian job, to do my job better, to increase my GT score to change MOS, to develop basic skills needed for college study, to get a certificate or degree, to obtain a credential, to improve my chances of promotion, to provide something to do in my free time, or other.

(4) Determine why respondents have not participated in an ACES program within the past 12 months. Some examples: no interest, costs too much, not enough time because of military commitments, lack of childcare, lack of transportation, desired program is not available, already have the degree or certificate desired, or other.

(5) Determine whether the respondent is interested in taking college classes or pursuing a credential.

(6) Ask which college or vocational program most interests the respondent (academic certificate or diploma, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, credential, or other).

(7) Find out which fields of study interest the respondent (for example, accounting and finance, history, medical).

(8) Ask which class lengths works best (for example, 5 to 8 weeks, 9 to 12 weeks, 13 to 16 weeks).

(9) Ask about delivery formats (such as early morning classes, online class, lunchtime classes, evening classes, weekend classes, or other).

(10) Determine availability of Internet access (personal computer at home, computer lab in the Army education center or office, computer at work, computer in the installation library, or other).

c. Army Continuing Education System services. In this section, ask questions about the ACES services that helped the respondents meet their educational and professional goals.

(1) Ask the respondents which ACES services they used within the past 12 months (counseling, Army TA, GoArmyEd decision-support tool or other interest inventories, testing services, MLF, ALC, or other).

(2) Determine how many respondents have had their military training and experience evaluated for college credit by an EI.

(3) Determine how many respondents have a SOC DNS agreement.

(4) Ask how the Army education center or office can best provide information about programs and services (chain of command, Army official website, installation newspaper, Army radio, TV spot, posted flyers, bulletin boards, email messages, or other).

d. Feedback. Ask for additional comments or suggestions from respondents regarding ACES programs and services.

Appendix C

Informed Consent for Participants and Facilities

Dear participant,

I am a student at Murray State University working on a Doctoral Degree in P-20 and Community Leadership. I am conducting a dissertation research study entitled Military Education Programs from the Army Noncommissioned Officer Perspective. The purpose of the research study is to examine the awareness of education benefits and resources provided through the U.S. Army regarding pursuing a higher education degree. I am requesting your participation in completing the attached survey. The survey instrument will provide me quantitative data for analysis to supply leaders information on how to increase education awareness and encouragement in pursuing a higher education degree. If you so choose, a one-on-one interview will be conducted to supply qualitative data for additional thoughts and concerns.

Your participation will involve completing a written survey and optional interview. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, you can do so without penalty. The results will be maintained in confidence with no personal identifiers being used in the submitted dissertation.

In this research there is minimal risk for participation. “Minimal risk meaning the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves from those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examination or tests.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at [REDACTED] or ablankenship2@murraystate.edu.

The author has made every attempt to keep the questionnaire and interview anonymous. Privacy precautions included a locked container for completed surveys and interview notes in a badge authorized building. Results will not be identified with any participant identification or markings. In order to meet the requirements of informed consent and anonymity, the author will consider your consent to participate if you return a completed questionnaire and place a signed consent form.

Sincerely,

Amanda Houser

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I understand the nature of the study, the potential risks to me as a participant, and the means by which my identity will be kept confidential. My signature on this form also indicates that I am not a member of any protected category of participants (minor, pregnant woman when considered part of a designated research group of women, prisoner, or cognitatively impaired) and that I give my permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described.

Participant

Date

Appendix D

Participant Letter for 2-54 Infantry Battalion

Correspondence For:

LTC Darren Riley

Battalion Commander

2-54, Fort Benning, GA

Subject: Request to Use Premises and Subjects for Doctoral Research Study

1. My name is Amanda Houser, a Doctoral Candidate at Murray State University in the Doctor of P-20, and Community Leadership (EdD) program. I am requesting use of premises and access to Soldiers to conduct a research study to examine awareness of education benefits and the desire to pursue a higher education on enlisted Soldiers. If permission is granted, request you sign and date Enclosure (University Form for Consent to use Premises and Subjects).
2. The study is designed to investigate knowledge of education benefits and additional resources provided through Fort Benning in efforts to promote education.
3. The U.S. Army is made up of 80.79% enlisted personnel, out of all the noncommissioned officers, 82.9% do not participate in formal education beyond the high school level. The lack of formal higher education in this targeted group has not been identified. The gap in research continues to be an issue on how to better assist enlisted Soldiers in pursuing higher education while on active-duty.
4. Examining the awareness of education benefits through the U.S. Army, the resources available to them such as counselors and pain points that have hindered higher education will engage enlisted personnel in their current and future aspirations.
5. If you require any additional information, I can be reached at [REDACTED] or ablankenship2@murraystate.edu

Sincerely,

Amanda Houser

Amanda K. Houser

Enclosures:

University Form for Consent to use Premises and Subjects

Appendix E

Informed Consent for Participants and Facilities for 2-54 Infantry Battalion

Informed Consent for Participants and Facilities

Murray State University

INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO USE PREMISES, NAME, AND/OR SUBJECTS

Name of Facility, Organization, University, Institution, or Association

I, DARREN RILEY, hereby authorize Amanda Houser student at Murray State University, to use the premises, name, and/or subjects to conduct a study entitled.

RILEY.DARREN.A.1171698096 Digitally signed by RILEY.DARREN.A.1171698096
Date: 2022.06.29 17:03:00 -04'00'

Signature

Date

Title

BATTALION COMMANDER

Name of Facility



Appendix F

Participant Letter for 75th Ranger Regiment

Correspondence For:

MSG Michael Smith

Phalanx NCOIC

75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Benning, GA

Subject: Request to Use Premises and Subjects for Doctoral Research Study

6. My name is Amanda Houser, a Doctoral Candidate at Murray State University in the Doctor of P-20, and Community Leadership (EdD) program. I am requesting use of premises and access to Soldiers to conduct a research study to examine awareness of education benefits and the desire to pursue a higher education on enlisted Soldiers. If permission is granted, request you sign and date Enclosure (University Form for Consent to use Premises and Subjects).
7. The study is designed to investigate knowledge of education benefits and additional resources provided through Fort Benning in efforts to promote education.
8. The U.S. Army is made up of 80.79% enlisted personnel, out of all the noncommissioned officers, 82.9% do not participate in formal education beyond the high school level. The lack of formal higher education in this targeted group has not been identified. The gap in research continues to be an issue on how to better assist enlisted Soldiers in pursuing higher education while on active-duty.
9. Examining the awareness of education benefits through the U.S. Army, the resources available to them such as counselors and pain points that have hindered higher education will engage enlisted personnel in their current and future aspirations.
10. If you require any additional information, I can be reached at [REDACTED] or ablankenship2@murraystate.edu

Sincerely,

Amanda Houser

Amanda K. Houser

Enclosures:

University Form for Consent to use Premises and Subjects

Appendix G

Informed Consent for Participants and Facilities for 75th Ranger Regiment

Informed Consent for Participants and Facilities

Murray State University

INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO USE PREMISES, NAME, AND/OR SUBJECTS

Name of Facility, Organization, University, Institution, or Association

I, hereby authorize Amanda Houser, student at Murray State University, to use the premises, name, and/or subjects to conduct a study entitled Military Education Programs from the Army Noncommissioned Officer Perspective.

Signature



Date 23 June 2022

Master Sergeant Michael B. Smith

Title: Phalanx Director. The Phalanx Program is a professional development program that focuses on education, career advancement, and holistic wellness.

Name of Organization: 75th Ranger Regiment, United States Army

Appendix H

Participant Survey Email

Good afternoon,

My name is Amanda Houser and I'm a Doctoral Candidate at Murray State University. I am currently in search of the disconnect between Army education benefits, the lack of awareness and use of education benefits amongst the noncommissioned officer ranks. This study is purely voluntary including an online survey and additional one-on-one interview if you choose to participate. I have attached a brief overview of my dissertation, a copy of the consent form which is also embedded in the survey, and approval from your battalion leadership to survey noncommissioned officers and use of premises if needed.

Survey link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/N7JRLB9>

Survey Password: ed1234

Thank you for your consideration and please let me know if you have any questions or concerns,

Amanda Houser

Doctoral Candidate

Murray State University

ablankenship2@murraystate.edu

Appendix I

Survey Monkey Questions

1. What is your Rank?
 - a. E4- Corporal or Specialist
 - b. E5- Sergeant
 - c. E6- Staff Sergeant
 - d. E7- Sergeant First Class
2. What is your age group?
 - a. 18-24 years old
 - b. 25-34 years old
 - c. 35-44 years old
 - d. 45-54 years old
3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
 - a. High school diploma or GED
 - b. Some college
 - c. Associate degree
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Master's degree

- f. Professional degree
 - g. Doctoral degree
4. What is your educational goal?
- a. None
 - b. Degree (Associate, Bachelor, Master, or Professional degree)
 - c. Vocational/Trade
 - d. Technical Certification
 - e. Other, please specify
5. Does your current education level match your employment needs?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
6. To what extent do the following statements apply to why you are not enrolled in higher education. (Scale of Not at All, Somewhat, Very Much, and Most of All)
- a. I don't have time
 - b. I don't know how to apply for a degree/program
 - c. I wouldn't be able to with family obligations
 - d. I'm not interested in higher education
 - e. I don't feel I need higher education

7. To what extent would pursue higher education benefit your life? (Scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree)
- a. It would/does make me a better person
 - b. It would/does improve my opportunities in the civilian world
 - c. It would/does make me better at my job
8. To what extent are you familiar with the following education programs? (Scale of Didn't know it existed, Familiar, do not know how to utilize it, Familiar, know how to utilize it, and Have used this)
- a. Army COOL
 - b. Army IgnitED
 - c. GI Bill
 - d. Tuition Assistance
9. Have you sought education guidance or assistance from the Fort Benning or other on post Education center?
- a. No
 - b. Yes, it was useful
 - c. Yes, it was not useful
10. Does the idea of working with an Education Counselor increase, decrease, or remain neutral your desire for college education or professional advancement?

- a. Increase, please specify
- b. Decrease, please specify
- c. Remain neutral, please specify

11. Would you be interested in participating in a one-on-one recorded interview?

- a. No
- b. If so, please leave your email address.

Appendix J

Protocol for Individual Interviews

1. Begin with one facilitator providing introductory comments:
 - a. Welcome, researcher induction, and thank interviewee for volunteering to participate.
 - b. Provide the informed consent form with their signature.
2. Give a very brief overview of the project and goals for the interview.
3. Give the interviewee information about the process and length of the interview.
4. Provide basic guidelines for the interview.
 - a. Participants have the right to not answer a question and there is no risk associated with skipping questions, this a voluntary interview. There are no right or wrong answers.
 - b. c. The researcher will be available after the interview if you have questions, and we can provide information additional resources if needed.
 - c. Do you have any questions?
5. Let the interviewee know that the researcher will be taking notes about what is discussed, and that the interview is being recorded all identifying information will not be used in the confidential study.
6. Let the interviewee know when the last question will be asked this will cue a response for information that may not have come up during their answers. For example, “Is there anything else you want to share?”
7. Thank all participants for participating in my research study, thank participants for their time.

Appendix K

One-on-One Interview Questions

1. Are you aware of Tuition Assistance (TA) benefits? What do you know generally about the benefits?
2. Are you aware of Credentialing Assistance (CA) benefits? What at do you know generally about the benefits?
3. Are you aware of GI Bill benefits? Please describe what you know.
4. What has your experience been with the Fort Benning Education Center?
5. Have you sought education guidance or assistance from the Fort Benning or other on post Education center?
 - a. If so, have you worked with an Education Counselor?
 - b. If so, how was your experience?
 - c. If you haven't, is there a reason?
6. Does the idea of working with an Education Counselor increase, decrease, or remain neutral your desire for college education or professional advancement?
 - a. Increase, please specify
 - b. Decrease, please specify
 - c. Remain neutral, please specify
7. What is your biggest barrier to taking college classes?

- a. Desired programs/classes not available in a classroom format
 - b. Online classes do not work for me
 - c. Enrollment in classes too time consuming
 - d. Counseling/advising services not readily available
 - e. Military duties do not leave enough time
 - f. Personal life/obligations take priority
 - g. Not interested at this time
 - h. Out of pocket expenses too high
 - i. Already attained desired education goals
 - j. Other, please specify
8. Does your education level match the educational requirements for civilians working in equivalent positions in your MOS/industry?

Appendix L

Research Questions Matrix

Research Question	Why these needs answered	Needed Data	Where to find the Data	How to get Access	Survey Question	Interview Question
What hinders active-duty soldiers from pursuing higher education?	I want to discover the education benefits awareness and usage in active-duty enlisted soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, GA.	Survey Question Interview Question	Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in the grade of E5 through E7.	1) Obtain permission from the leadership and rosters to contact noncommissioned officers. 2) Get approval from the Murray State IRB to conduct research. 3) Contact noncommissioned officers through email, online survey, and in-person interviews	6	7
Are there career advancement advantages or disadvantages of obtaining higher education?	I want to discover the education benefits awareness and usage in active-duty enlisted soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, GA.	Interview Question	Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in the grade of E5 through E7.	1) Obtain permission from the leadership and rosters to contact noncommissioned officers. 2) Get approval from the Murray State IRB to conduct research. 3) Contact noncommissioned officers through email, online survey, and in-person interviews	4, 5, 7	8
Does having access to an on-post education center provide an increase or	I want to discover the education benefits awareness and usage in active-	Survey Question	Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in	1) Obtain permission from the leadership and rosters to contact	9, 10	4, 5, 6

decrease in desire to obtain higher education?	duty enlisted soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, GA.	Interview Question	the grade of E5 through E7.	noncommissioned officers. 2) Get approval from the Murray State IRB to conduct research. 3) Contact noncommissioned officers through email, online survey, and in-person interviews		
Does awareness of the education benefits increase or decrease active-duty soldiers from obtaining higher education?	I want to discover the education benefits awareness and usage in active-duty enlisted soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, GA.	Survey Question Interview Question	Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in the grade of E5 through E7.	1) Obtain permission from the leadership and rosters to contact noncommissioned officers. 2) Get approval from the Murray State IRB to conduct research. 3) Contact noncommissioned officers through email, online survey, and in-person interviews	8	1, 2, 3
What is the active-duty soldiers' attitude towards higher education?	I want to discover the education benefits awareness and usage in active-duty enlisted soldiers stationed at Fort Benning, GA.	Survey Question Interview Question	Active-duty enlisted noncommissioned officers in the grade of E5 through E7.	1) Obtain permission from the leadership and rosters to contact noncommissioned officers. 2) Get approval from the Murray State IRB to conduct research. 3) Contact noncommissioned officers through email, online survey, and in-person interviews	6, 7	7