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Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

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Nicola J. Hall

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

An Exploration of Military Doctoral Students' Journey to Degree Completion

by

Nicola J. Hall

MA, The College of William and Mary, 2014

BA, University of Edinburgh, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University
August 2019

Abstract

Little is known about the experiences of doctoral students who are active duty military or veterans seeking a degree in counselor education and supervision (CES). The purpose of this research was to positively impact the counseling profession by ensuring adequate representation of military-competent counselors through an exploration of the academic journey of military students. This research sought to highlight military students' perceptions of barriers and contributors to degree completion. Selection criteria for participants involved any United States military personnel classified as active or inactive. These military personnel had to have earned within the past 12 months or were currently enrolled in a counselor education and supervision PhD program at an institution accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. This research adopted a phenomenological hermeneutic theoretical approach to explore the lived experiences of 6 military students on their journey to degree completion in a CES doctoral program. The central research question focused on the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion. Key results emerged in the form of themes that contributed to degree completion such as helping other veterans/giving back and programmatic fit. Themes that showed prevalent barriers to degree completion included professional identity development, military students and degree completion, environmental factors, and access to military counselors. The implications of this study for social change include supporting academic institutions in reducing the attrition rates of military CES students.

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Oliver, never give up if you want something, go for it! Jeff, you were by my side every step of the way, thank you. Mum, thanks for believing in me. Dad, *we* made it! Matt, for reminding me what I'm capable of…get in there!

Thanks to all of the faculty who have helped shape my academic career and made this journey possible. Thanks to my friends who have encouraged, supported, and listened to me when I've needed a sounding board. You all made this journey what it was, life changing. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Little is known about the experiences of doctoral students who are active duty military or veterans and seeking a degree in counselor education and supervision (CES). This research will build upon the work of Bowen and Rudenstine (2014) to highlight the barriers to degree completion for military students in counselor education programs. Currently, there is a dearth of research determining the unique nature of the military students' experiences within CES programs. To positively impact the counseling profession by ensuring adequate representation of military competent counselors, the academic journey of military students should be explored. Wazed and Ng (2015) attempted to discern whether institutional websites are successful in attracting applicants who are the "right fit" for a program. Researchers have suggested that institutional websites that cater to specific populations and programs increase graduation rates (Ihme, Sonnenberg, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Stürmer, 2016; Range, Salgado, & White, 2014; Wazed & Ng, 2015). Yet researchers do not explicitly address CES programs or military populations. Without these data, academic institutions offering CES programs are limited in how they can successfully attract military students and thus, meet the needs of military populations.

The United States military population is made up of approximately 1,359,248 personnel when counting the Army, Navy, Marine Corp, Air Force, and Coast Guard (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). Mental health concerns for military personnel suggest mental health services are not being fully utilized (Clement et al., 2015; Hall, 2016; Ramchand, Rudavsky, Grant, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2015). Suggested reasons that military mental health needs are not being met include the stigma surrounding mental health and the competency of mental health professionals when serving military personnel (Clement et al., 2015; Sharp et al., 2015). In this research I seek to highlight military students' perceptions of barriers and contributors to degree completion.

A review of literature elucidates that little is known about military students pursuing a doctoral degree in counselor education. Without information about military students and their journey to degree completion, the ability to meet military personnel mental health needs is limited. The inclusion of counselor educators with a military background is significant for three main reasons: (a) By matriculating military counselor educators, negative attitudes about mental healthcare such as prior bad experiences due to counselor incompetence can be avoided. By encouraging military personnel to pursue a counseling profession an appreciation for military life, and increased understanding of unique military needs can be addressed (Owens, Herrera, & Whitesell, 2009; Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, & Southwick, 2009); (b) Military counselor educators can avoid treatment through a pathological lens by recognizing and understanding the unique needs of military clients. This can occur by developing an increased understanding of military culture with exposure to military programming during their degree. This education enables military counselor educators to avoid over pathologizing symptoms of military clients when faced with nontraditional societal responses (Carrola & Corbin-Burdick, 2015); and (c) Military counselor educators have an awareness of the military chain-of-command, which may require military personnel to disclose to a commanding officer treatment information. This barrier to treatment, can be dealt with in an empathetic way to alleviate concerns and by addressing questions of the client, the military counselor educator can reduce anxiety related to receiving treatment.

Counselors with military service provision have been found to be more competent in working with military populations (Cole, 2014; Hall, 2016; Jen der Pan, Deng, & Tsai, 2008). Counselors unfamiliar with military service may be unable to sufficiently address the concerns of the client. Hall (2016) identified this as a unique obstacle to treatment for the military and acknowledges priorities of the military can supersede the needs of the individual or family, which can influence the counseling experience. Hall (2016) argued a military counselor educator who is familiar with the unique nature of military life will be more successful in meeting their needs. Counseling supervisors familiar with these needs can ensure future counselors entering the profession are competent in this area by providing supervision and counseling services that acknowledge these needs. Also, by identifying these characteristics, academic institutions will be informed about the unique needs and characteristics of military students. Understanding the experiences of military students' in CES programs may inform CES programs on the potential academic needs of military students to support degree completion and thus increasing the likelihood of the increased societal presence of counselor educators and counselors available to provide services to other military personnel.

Background of the Problem

The following articles relating to military students and the academic journey in counselor education programs supports the rationale for conducting this research:

1. Researchers have discussed how mentorship, self-efficacy, and generic experiences can play a role in the doctoral academic journey (Devos et al., 2017; Perjessy, 2013; Pifer and Baker, 2016). However, researchers have not addressed the experiences of military students specifically and their journey to CES graduation.
2. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) suggested student experiences can add to the body of knowledge about CES students by creating an understanding of the obstacles they face prior to graduation. These researchers addressed the edict from Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) to explore a population whose diverse voices can address a gap in the literature about CES doctoral students and their journey to degree completion.
3. Gardner (2009) indicated doctoral students represent a diverse population varying in age, marital status, residential status, and academic participation (full-time or part-time) in comparison to their homogenous counterparts, undergraduates.
4. Protivnak and Foss (2009) pointed out a gap in research that focuses on CES programs and suggest future qualitative research of CES doctoral students to explore degree completion.
5. The United States Department of Education (USDE) suggested the prevalence of military students enrolled in higher education is increasing (Radford, Bentz, Dekker, Paslov, & RTI International, 2016). This increase can be attributed in part to the increase in benefits available to military personnel with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Military student enrollment at for-profit 2-year or higher schools increased

10% while enrollment at public colleges fell 5 % between 2007-2008 and 2011-2012. Military students are increasingly utilizing education benefits and awards with 41% of military graduate students taking online classes.

6. O'Herrin (2011) indicated academic institutions have developed programs and services designed to enhance veteran success in higher education. Yet little is known about the experiences of military students attending these programs and what specific program developments have positively influenced the academic experience for CES programs. Both government and institutional measures of military student success is anecdotal at best.
7. As increasing numbers of military students seek to complete degrees this creates an opportunity for institutions to consider military students as a critical recruitment population. Brown and Gross (2011) suggested a failure to develop greater understanding about the military student experience could lead to unsuccessful experiences for both student and academic institution.
8. Mitchell, Blosnich, Gordon, and Broyles, (2017) found military students are unique in their academic experience when considering their response to alcohol. For example, students with military service history were nearly twice as likely to experience police encounters because of drinking than nonmilitary students, (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] = 1.91, 95% confidence interval [CI] [1.02, 3.57]) and were more than twice as likely to experience nonconsensual sex (aOR = 2.68, 95% CI [1.17, 6.19]). Military students were also more likely to have unprotected sex after drinking alcohol compared to nonmilitary students. These findings

indicate military student experiences differ from the nonmilitary population and as such suggest increased understanding can aid in ensuring a more positive academic experience.

9. Potential barriers experienced by military personnel who seek counseling services include discomfort with discussing mental health problems, beliefs promoted by military culture, witnessing treatment seekers' experiences, career concerns, stigma, leadership problems, and practical barriers such as a lack of social support, a lack of leadership support, and perceived symptom severity (Zinzow et al., 2013). Raymond et al. (2013) suggested increasing treatment-facilitating interventions, reframe treatment-inhibiting perceptions, change leader behaviors, and employ testimonials. One means to reframe and overcome these barriers is by ensuring military counselor educators are accessible to serve the military population.
10. By matriculating military counselor educators, the negative attitudes associated with utilizing mental health care such as prior bad experiences can be addressed (Owens et al., 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2009).
11. Issues associated with the lack of knowledge civilian counselors have on military culture include bad experiences for military clients, which prevent military personnel returning for treatment (Owens et al., 2009). Negative experiences can manifest in the counselor's lack of military knowledge such as ranking.
12. According to Carrola and Corbin-Burdick (2015), it is the responsibility of counselors to balance the unique military experiences of clients rather than

considering treatment through a pathological lens that is myopic in nature. Military counselors have the potential to offer greater understanding and awareness of military experiences and subsequently avoid over-pathologizing symptoms of military clients when faced with nontraditional societal responses (Carrola & Corbin-Burdick, 2015).

13. According to Hall (2016), a lack of awareness of military culture leaves counselors at a clear disadvantage in knowing how to work with the military population. Hall also outlined important factors pertinent to military life that may be unfamiliar to counselors external to the military, for example, military culture, deployment, nontraditional family units, and military acronyms. Focus is placed on the complex nature of military roles and how traditional counseling assumptions may conflict with the needs of this population. Hall approached the topic of counseling in the military through a traditional gender role lens. This limits the value of her observations because of the significance of "Do not ask, do not tell" and gender bias considerations (United States Department of Defense [DoD], 1993). However, Hall argued counselors require specialized competence to work with military clients and provides the example of how a counselor must navigate obstacles to confidentiality. For example, a military counselor may be required to disclose to a commanding officer treatment information, which prevents military personnel from seeking mental health treatment on base. Hall drew attention to the unique nature of military service and acknowledges priorities of the military can supersede the needs of the individual or family,

> which can influence the counseling experience. Hall finally identified common presenting problems facing military personnel such as stress and PTSD, which supports the argument that counselors familiar with the unique nature of military life will be more successful in meeting their needs.

To build upon this research in a scholarly and comprehensive way, the nature of the study including research framework, questions, and data will now be discussed.

Problem Statement

Little is known about the experiences of doctoral students who are active duty military or veterans seeking a degree in CES. In this research I will build upon the work of Bowen and Rudenstine (2014) to highlight the barriers to degree completion for military students in counselor education programs. Currently, there is a dearth of research determining the unique nature of the military students' experiences within CES programs. To positively impact the counseling profession by ensuring adequate representation of military competent counselors, the academic journey of military students should be explored. Wazed and Ng (2015) attempted to discern whether institutional websites are successful in attracting applicants who are the "right fit" for a program. Researchers have suggested that institutional websites that cater to specific populations and programs increase graduation rates (Ihme et al., 2016; Range et al., 2014; Wazed & Ng, 2015). Yet, researchers do not explicitly address CES programs or military populations and these data, academic institutions offering CES programs are limited in how they can successfully attract military students and meet counseling the needs of military populations.

The United States military population is made up of over 1.3 million military personnel not including their family, friends and loved ones (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2019). Hawkins (2010) projected as many as one in five service members experience mental health concerns such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicidal ideation, substance use disorders, and traumatic brain injury. The significant health concerns for military personnel demonstrate a need for competent mental health professionals (Clement et al., 2015; Hall, 2016; Ramchand et al., 2015). Counselors with a military background can help alleviate barriers to mental health treatment when working with military clients thus improving treatment outcomes. In an endeavor to address this need, this research seeks to highlight military students' perceptions of barriers and contributors to degree completion.

A review of literature to date elucidates that little is known about military students pursuing a doctoral degree in counselor education. Without information about military students and their journey to degree completion, the counseling profession will struggle to meet military mental health needs and ensure positive treatment outcomes for this population. Barriers to treatment result in higher costs to the military in terms of personnel having to take time off, early retirement, or at the very least they can distract from the military role, responsibilities, and tasks that the individual is attempting to fulfill. If military CES students are not identified and attracted to CES careers, then doctoral programs may fail to meet the needs of those military students' who can bridge the gap to mental health treatment for military populations. By identifying CES military student characteristics, academic institutions will be informed about the unique needs and characteristics of military students. Understanding the experiences of military students' in CES programs may inform CES programs on the potential academic needs of military students to support degree completion and thus increase the presence of competent counselor educators and counselors available to potentially provide services to this important population.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of military students on their journey to degree completion in a counselor education and supervision doctoral program. By identifying patterns and themes that exist, this research may inform academic institutions and CES doctoral programs of the potential contributors and barriers to military students' degree completion. This research may also serve to encourage military personnel who seek to further their education, to apply to, and enroll in, a CES doctoral program by acknowledging the barriers they face and creating a pathway to degree completion. This research will contribute to the current body of literature about CES doctoral programs to assist in program development and the likelihood of meeting the unique needs of military personnel who utilize mental health services.

Questions Guiding the Research Inquiry

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion?

Research Question 2: What personal characteristics positively contributed to academically successful military CES students?

To answer these questions, I will now outline the research approach to be adopted.

Conceptual Framework

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach will be utilized to explore the lived experiences of military students enrolled in a CES doctoral program. According to Beebe (2004), the foundation of this approach is to understand the lived experiences of participants (military students) within the context of meaning making. Hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with the meaning of predominantly written, as well as visual, and musical forms of communication (Beebe, 2004). In this research I consider the written medium in the form of transcribed interviews to consider the meaning participants place on their experiences (Farina, 2014; Patton, 2015). Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenological method not only focuses on interpretation as it relates to meaning but also the meaning behind the engagement of such experience (Cai, 2013). For example, understanding the initial decision-making process military students adopt when electing to study CES can shape their current experiences. I plan to conceptualize this study through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens because the focus is to develop understanding about the lived experiences of military students who completed a CES doctoral program. By understanding student experiences (phenomenon), I can identify common contributors and obstacles to graduation for a military student population. By understanding CES student perspectives, I can analyze the data following an organizational system focusing on narrative themes (Patterson & Williams, 2004). I will contextualize decisions and actions in response to educational barriers and interpret the meaning of unique academic journeys for each student as well as the aggregate (Cypress, 2017; Patterson & Williams, 2004).

The hermeneutic circle is grounded in ontological philosophy and is an interpretive phenomenology that Heidegger created to address the concept which considers future, past, and present, and the activity of living and being in the world (Cerbone, 2009; Heidegger, 1977/2011). *Dasein* is an existential concept that facilitates understanding of the lived experience through interpretation of personal existence through questioning and consideration of possibilities (van Manen, 2014). In this research, the hermeneutic circle will be made up of parts of transcripts and complete transcripts, which through interpretation can identify phenomena and discover the truth of the whole, which translates into the understanding of military students' experience (Friesen, Henrikson, & Saevi, 2012). To be clear who military CES doctoral students are I will now explain how this population will be defined for the purpose of this study.

Definitions

To define military CES doctoral students, a review of recent research incorporating this population took place. Safford and Stinton (2016) defined doctoral students as mature individuals with families, who may have multiple roles (parent, student, and employee), possibly work, and may have returned to academia through employment or vocational pathways.

For this study, I expanded this definition to narrow the scope of the research. Military students are any retired, active duty, or reserve military personnel who are CES students currently attending or have graduated within 12 months from a Council for

Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP) accredited doctoral program. Students may have attended the CES program in either a part-time or full-time capacity. Now that this key term is defined it is important to acknowledge other assumptions related to the research.

Assumptions

This study was shaped by several assumptions that could impact the context and interpretation of experiences. The purpose of outlining these assumptions is to incorporate transparency and acknowledge how assumptions can impact the research process.

- As researcher and CES student, I could transfer my personal experiences and interpretation of experiences onto the participants during the interviews and data analysis stage of the process.
- Participants were willing to share their lived experiences with me.
- The phenomenological approach assumes lived experiences can be reduced to their essence.
- The hermeneutic approach assumes lived experiences can be understood through cultural context and the examination of relationships within the lived experience.
- Interviews would lead to findings that would assist academic institutions in supporting the needs of military students.

By acknowledging assumptions, I can reduce bias and increase transparency. Yet additional parameters have been set for this research to limit the focus and make it replicable. These are outlined in the scope, delimitations, and limitations sections.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of this research will involve excluding academic degrees that are not CES. Academic degrees that are not CACREP accredited will also be excluded because the level of academic stressors and competency level may differ between students which would make comparison of data less dependable. The scope of the research will be limited to United States citizens. Specifically, military students were chosen as a focus to build on prior research that focuses on the experiences of women (Perjessy, 2013).

Limitations

Military personnel must be from the United States Armed Services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, or Marine Core. Military personnel must also have attended a CACREP accredited program or have graduated within 12 months. Hermeneutic interviews are considered directed conversations and therefore a limitation is the interviewer should avoid direct questioning (Patterson & Williams, 2004). Text in hermeneutics can take on their own form, and there is no way the interviewer can know what form that will be until seeing the results (Patterson & Williams, 2004). In addition, a limitation of this research is the transferability of the research because findings may not be appropriate to fields of study outside of the counseling profession. Also, a limitation of this research is that only one researcher will transcribe the data and therefore the data findings may be subject to bias or prejudice of the researcher during transcription. This can be avoided by the committee chair reviewing data transcription. After setting these parameters, I will focus on why this research will be significant to the field and is important to social change.

Significance

This research can inform academic institutions and CES doctoral programs of the potential contributors and barriers to military students' degree completion. This research may also serve to encourage future military students to apply to and enroll in a CES doctoral programs by acknowledging the barriers they face and creating a pathway to degree completion. This research will contribute to the current body of literature about CES doctoral programs to assist in program development and ultimately increase the likelihood of meeting the unique needs of military personnel who utilize community mental health services.

This study will contribute to the field of counseling and counselor education by developing an understanding of degree completion for military students. By informing the counseling profession about the needs of CES military student's academic institutions can adjust programming and course requirements to meet student needs. This in turn can benefit communities by ensuring the mental health needs of military personnel can be met by counselors with military backgrounds (Baker & Moore, 2015).

Social Change

This research can lead to social change by creating a pathway for student success. CES doctoral programs can be developed to meet the unique needs of military students who seek to pursue a CES doctoral education. This study can impact the counseling profession by promoting the need for ongoing research on military students enrolled in

CES doctoral programs. Policy makers can use the research to guide institutions of higher learning and specifically CES programs. Stakeholders can also implement plans to respond to the identified needs of this population, such as flexible online classes that reduce barriers for military students facing time management challenges. Barriers such as this can be identified and possibly eliminated. Military students' representative of a diverse population will have greater access to degree completion. Students will see previous barriers have been removed creating an opportunity for future generations to go to school to become a counselor. Finally, educators and supervisors will be able to recognize the characteristics of successful military CES doctoral students who will shape the future of the profession.

Summary

The significance of researching military doctoral students' journey to degree completion has been established. Due to increasing mental health needs in the United States military, this research will help academic institutions reduce attrition and support students in their academic journey. The social implications of conducting this research are far-reaching with students, academic institutions, and communities alike benefitting from a deeper understanding of this population. Parameters of this research have been identified such as assumptions, scope, limitations, and delimitations. Through this research, the competence of counselors working with military populations will be highlighted, and specific ways for social change to occur will be discussed to promote social justice in the counseling profession. To accomplish this, a review of literature pertaining to this topic will now be shared in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

A concise synopsis of the literature will be provided before I narrow the focus to demonstrate the relevance of the research problem. I will provide an overview of the research strategy including databases I accessed, key terms, and my rationale for the research approach. The literature review has been separated into key sections that provide a clear picture of the research topics. These topics include developing a foundational understanding of research on doctoral education, an overview of academic institutions and CES doctoral programming, military education and access to doctoral degrees, military students and degree completion, barriers to military mental healthcare including stigma, and access to mental health treatment, counselor competency, and aligning academic programs and military culture. I will outline what is unknown in this field of study and why this study will fill a gap in the literature before looking at the research methodology.

Concise Synopsis of Literature

To attain a doctoral degree is a lifelong academic achievement that denotes expertise in the field and creates opportunities for the recipient that might otherwise be prohibitive. With attention being placed on the mental health needs of military personnel and their families it is disappointing to discover a lack of representation of military personnel representing the CES field. There are multiple factors that contribute to this phenomenon, including an understanding of student development, the academic challenges and obstacles facing doctoral students. The military culture is unique and as such can create both barriers and access to academia. Most significant, is the experience students have during their doctoral degree that can influence degree completion or dropout rates. Determining the factors contributing to degree completion calls for advocacy for military personnel who endeavor to embark on a CES doctoral degree to support increased successes. The field of counseling can benefit from research that focuses specifically on military students in CES programs because of the increased need for counseling services for this population. To make mental health services accessible to military populations' academic institutions must understand the needs of military students. This literature review will provide justification for further research into the military doctoral student's journey to degree completion by highlighting significant research that has contributed to the counseling profession to date, gaps in the research, and what is unknown about this area of study.

The military student population has grown in the United States in recent years (Defense Manpower Data Center [DMDC], 2018). Research suggests it befits academic institutions to address this increasing population. In doing so, these doctoral students can have positive academic experiences and academic institutions can benefit from increasing matriculation and graduation rates (Lovitts, 2001). By increasing military CES graduation rates, mental health treatment can become more accessible to military populations. To support these claims, a review of my literature search strategy will now be outlined.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search initially began in December 2015, where I setup automatic searches in Google Scholar for any new research conducted relating to my topic of interest. A technique I adopted while searching in databases was to truncate. For example, using the word grad* in the search engine will include terms such as graduation, graduate, graduating.

Linking Google Scholar to my Walden Library incorporated Walden articles into my Google search. I initially used an excel spreadsheet as a strategy to track the articles I sourced for the literature review. The spreadsheet included information such as the name of the database the article was sourced from, the author, publisher, date of publication, journal title and if a dearth of information existed in a specific search area. When a lack of research was discovered, I would initially note it in my tracking spreadsheet and later this information shaped the focus of this study. As findings suggest there is a dearth of information pertaining to a military student's CES journey to degree completion. In June 2016, I transitioned all citations and reference information to the online tool Zotero and continue to increase my data sources utilizing this tool.

Accessed Library Databases and Search Engines

The following library databases were utilized to support this research:

- Thoreau Multi-Database Search
- CINAHL & MEDLINE Simultaneous Search
- ERIC and Education Source Simultaneous Search
- Walden Library
- PsycINFO
- PsycARTICLES
- SocINDEX with Full Text

- Political Science Complete & Business Source Complete Combined Search
- Psychology Databases Simultaneous Search
- PsycTESTS & Health and Psychosocial Instruments Simultaneous
- SAGE Journals (formerly SAGE Premier)
- SAGE Knowledge (formerly SAGE Encyclopedias)
- ScienceDirect

The following research engines were utilized to support this research:

- Google Scholar
- The Internet Archive Search
- Webopedia Search
- Bing
- Google
- Yahoo

Key Search Terms and Combination Search Terms

The following search key terms and combination terms were utilized for this research. I used the following key search terms in each of the aforementioned databases and search engines; counselor, counselor education, counselor educator, counselor education and supervision, doctoral students, doctoral graduation rates, PhD graduation, PhD program, PhD student, PhD experiences, military counselors, military counselor educators, military doctoral students, military graduation rates, military mental health, mental health students, mental health graduation rates, counseling student, counseling journey, counseling academic journey, CES, CACREP, academic institutions, academic websites program descriptions, military, doctoral students, graduate students, academic journey, minority PhD students, military education, military students, military student experiences, academic experiences, graduation experiences, attrition, military attrition, CES attrition, attrition rates, counselor educator attrition, counselor educator experiences, counselor educator academic experiences.

Explanation of Search Process

I began the research process by familiarizing myself with research databases. Specifically, databases that focus on psychology, counseling, and military related topics. SAGE Journals (formerly SAGE Premier) met these criteria. Research later extended to encyclopedias and handbooks to add further data and statistical support to the research findings, SAGE Knowledge (formerly SAGE Encyclopedias) met this research need. I used ScienceDirect database to gather supporting information or when I found the Walden databases did not provide the resources I needed. For example, to gather evidence supporting military attrition rates. The initial search process was broad focusing on key terms in all databases listed. I then narrowed the search by considering only the most relevant and recent articles and research data. Additional questions came up as the research process continued, for example, I did not know statistics for military counselor educators. These secondary questions lead to more specific searches in the databases that had proven most productive, which was Walden Library Database, Thoreau, and ERIC.

Lack of Research

When research was lacking, I made a point to determine whether this directly impacted the direction of the research, and discussed possible options with my Committee Chair, and then acknowledged clearly in the research to provide clarity and a basis for my assumptions and interpretation of my findings.

Conceptual Framework

I will adopt a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. According to Beebe (2004), the foundation of this approach is to understand the lived experiences of participants (military students) within the context of meaning making. Hermeneutic researchers are concerned with the meaning of predominantly written, as well as visual and musical forms of communication (Beebe, 2004). I will consider the written medium in the form of transcribed interviews to consider the meaning participants place on their experiences (Farina, 2014; Patton, 2015). Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenological method not only focuses on interpretation as it relates to meaning but also the meaning behind the engagement of such experience (Cai, 2013; Gadamer, 2008). For example, why military students chose to study CES in the first place can shape their current experiences.

Rationale for the Choice of Theory

I plan to approach this study through a hermeneutic phenomenological conceptual lens because the focus is to develop understanding about a lived experience. By understanding student experiences (phenomenon), I can identify common threads and obstacles to graduation for a military student population. By understanding CES student perspectives, I can analyze the written medium (transcript) by following an organizational system focusing on narrative themes (Patterson & Williams, 2004). I can contextualize decisions and actions in response to educational barriers and interpret the meaning of unique academic journeys for each student as well as the aggregate which aligns with the research question and purpose (Cypress, 2017; Patterson & Williams, 2004). To fully appreciate why this research is warranted I will now review literature pertaining to this research topic.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Foundational Understanding of Research on Doctoral Education

The early research of Gardner (2009) offered a monograph of four main reasons why it is important to understand doctoral student development. The reasons include (a) doctoral student attrition is expensive for academic institutions; (b) doctoral student attrition has social consequences, which are documented as being of concern (Maher, Wofford, Roksa, & Feldon, 2018); (c) we should be concerned for personal reasons, that the best and brightest of our nation are failing, and the consequences of this failure can lead to far reaching additional problems such as debt (Baum, 2016; Holley, 2015), and longstanding feelings of failure (Wu, 2015); and (d) an absence of literature relating to doctoral students inhibits the higher education community from understanding and supporting their needs.

Gardner (2009) argued since the first United States doctorate was awarded in 1861 (Noble, 1994) we know little about the journey and experiences of those pursuing a doctoral degree. Gardner’s (2009) rationale is based on (a) the belief that graduate students are self-aware and developmental theory research has not significantly changed, (b) doctoral students are seen as colleagues or professionals and, (c) a focus on undergraduates has superseded doctoral research due to the higher percentage of undergraduate students participating in higher education. Gardner (2009) asked the questions what, why, and how for faculty, staff, administrators, and students about doctoral student development. These questions remain central to the understanding of a doctoral student's journey today. Since Gardner's foundational observations, the work of Perjessy (2013) and Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook (2013) among others have introduced lines of inquiry into doctoral student experiences to better understand this population. This research offsets Gardner's earlier claims that little research has been done in the field of doctoral study. Yet, more research is needed particularly in the field of CES.

It is important to note, Gardner's (2009) research is not empirical in nature. The research cannot be replicated, and the research question, framework, theoretical foundation, and analysis are not presented. However, Gardner successfully illustrates a monologic picture of doctoral student development based upon prior research. By considering the findings of Gardner within this context, the observations are suitably justified and warrant mentioning in this study as a means to ground the history of doctoral students and their developmental journey.

Academic Institutions and Doctoral Programming

By gaining a greater understanding of students and their developmental journey academic institutions can cater programs to attract students that can meet the needs of the communities they represent. Academic institutions attempt to identify students that are a good ‘fit’ for their unique doctoral programs (Bagaka, Badillo, Bransteter, & Rispinto, 2015; Gardner, 2009; Pyhältö, & Keskinen, 2012). In doing so they hope to increase the likelihood of a student reaching degree completion. By adopting this approach, academic institutions increase the likelihood that student’s either meet or exceed academic standards. They must also understand what potential students need in order to be successful. For example, military students need access to online classes more so than other students (USDE, 2016).

CACREP (2016) has endeavored to develop programming to meet societal needs. By attending CACREP accredited doctoral programs CES students are ensuring they receive an education that ultimately enables them to meet client and community needs. Yet programming alone is not enough, academic institutions must endeavor to support students as they embark on their academic journey both at the recruitment stage and throughout their academic journey. To accomplish this, academic institutions must develop an understanding of the populations they hope to serve (Lovitts, 2001). When attempting to recruit students, academic institutions must identify ways to appeal to students who will be the right fit for the program. Research that aids in this endeavor includes that which addresses the unique characteristics of students, their academic needs, lifestyle, and socioeconomic traits (Litalien, Guay, & Morin, 2015). Academic institutions have been able to successfully increase matriculation and graduation rates by aligning programming to meet these unique student characteristics, an example of how this can be found in the research of Burkholder (2012).

Burkholder (2012) conducted a phenomenological study to better understand returning counselor education doctoral students. Specifically, the issues of retention, attrition, and perceived experiences. The study involved six women with a mean age of 36 who completed two rounds of 60 to 90-minute interviews in-person and via phone/video conference. Four themes described how they departed from and returned to study: (i) salient personal events, (ii) faculty-student interactions are noticed and important, (iii) departure is informed by personal factors, and (iv) departure is informed by academic culture. Burkholder (2012) concluded that personal issues should not be underestimated as factors influencing a student's ability to reach degree completion. In addition, normalizing the reasons to leave a program can assist a student in later returning. In contrast, a failure by academic staff to acknowledge a student's priorities and offer support during the decision to leave can lead to negative ramifications for the program. Finally, Burkholder (2012) recommended programs solicit feedback from students and adjust programming to reduce attrition, such as adding program interventions to assist students who are struggling. Limitations of this research include the participant's concerns about anonymity and participant speculation about faculty actions. A strength of the study was it specifically focused on doctoral level counselor educators which adds to the limited research on this population and encourages CES programs to further understand student experiences to increase retention.

Litalien et al. (2015) utilized a quantitative approach when researching doctoral attrition rates. Adopting a five-factor model, targeting two sample populations (N=244/ N=1060), they found motivation is more significant than gender, citizenship, program type, or age in a student’s journey toward degree completion. These findings were shown to be valid with complete measurement invariance and a reliability coefficient of .93 and .98 respectively. A strength of this research was the two-sample strategy. A limitation of this research was the single location where the research was conducted. Despite this, the findings were reliable and suggest intrinsic characteristics are more important than demographics when determining whether a student will complete an academic program. Research has also been done to discern how students differ in their academic needs and what students find helpful when engaging in academic programming (Perjessy, 2013). By designing academic programs to meet student needs academic institutions can benefit from increased graduation rates (Burkholder, 2012; Litalien et al., 2015). This research suggests catering academic programs to meet student needs can lead to positive outcomes for recruitment, retention, and attrition within these programs. Student development and academic programming have been shown to impact a student’s journey. To build on this foundation it is important to also consider factors unique to the military student.

Military Education and Access to a Doctoral Degree

Military personnel are afforded the opportunity to pursue academic goals by receiving incentives such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill and Scholarships to offset academic fees (National Board for Certified Counselor, 2014; USDE, 2016). These financial benefits assist United States military in pursuing counseling education. The USDE (2016), suggested the prevalence of military students enrolled in higher education is increasing (Radford et al., 2016). This increase can be attributed in part to the increase in benefits available to military personnel with legislation such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill (USDE, 2016).

Substantial research can also be found on military veterans and their path to education (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Callahan & Jarrett, 2014; Green & Van Dusen, 2012; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). The experiences of veterans with disabilities who embark on an academic journey is also documented (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Madaus & Miller, 2009). Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) focused on the transition for American military veterans into academia, yet their research does not differentiate between academic program's and little is known about military students that embark specifically on CES doctoral programs.

Military student enrollment at for-profit 2-year or higher schools increased 10% while enrollment at public colleges fell 5 % between 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 (USDE, 2016). These figures indicate military students are increasingly utilizing education benefits and awards which may be attributable to online access as 41% of military graduate students take online classes (USDE, 2016). Not only can current military personnel enroll but also those exiting military service. It is projected that 4.3 million military personnel will transition out of the military between 2003 and 2019 (Zogas, 2017). With financial aid such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill and veteran academic interests supporting enrollment, academic institutions have the opportunity to cater programming to military students and military counseling needs.

The lifestyle of the military can create barriers to education, for example, travel requirements may lead to military personnel having limited access to a brick and mortar classroom experiences which can impede some students learning experience (De Pedro, Atuel, Malchi, Esqueda, Benbenishty, & Astor, 2014). Unfortunately, just because financial support and programming research has been conducted to encourage military personnel invest in academia this does not guarantee success for military students.

Military Students and Degree Completion

Research focusing on military students suggests they rely more heavily on online options, may be older, and have multiple life roles (Employee, Spouse, Parent) than other students (De Pedro, et al., 2014). These factors can make academic requirements more challenging to accomplish when juggled other life priorities (De Pedro et al., 2014). Military students may also have additional pressures compromising their ability to meet academic challenges such as a work is more important than school mentality (Lambert & Morgan, 2009). This is illustrated by military students predominantly favoring online programming due to their job demands (Lambert & Morgan, 2009; USDE, 2016). Yet, little research has been done to define and delineate how CES programs can ensure the success of military students who undertake them.

Programming improvements and changes occur on an ongoing basis with CACREP standards most recently being updated in 2016. The 2016 Standards outline the quality expected of accredited CES programs which are reviewed every 2-8 years to ensure quality is maintained at accredited institutions but unfortunately these standards do not incorporate a military component (CACREP, 2016).

Research by O'Herrin (2011) indicates academic institutions have developed programs and services designed to enhance veteran success in higher education. Yet little is known about the experiences of military students attending CES programs and what specific program developments have led to degree completion for the military population. Both government and institutional measures of military student success in CES programs is anecdotal at best. As increasing numbers of military students seek to complete degrees this creates an opportunity for institutions that offer CES programs to consider military students as a critical recruitment population.

Brown and Gross (2011) warn that a failure to develop greater understanding about the military student experience could lead to unsuccessful outcomes for both students and academic institutions. Mitchell et al. (2017) provide an example of how this lack of understanding can result in negative outcomes for academic institutions. Mitchell et al. (2017) found military students are unique in their academic experience when considering their response to alcohol. For example, students with military service history were nearly twice as likely to experience police encounters because of drinking than non-military students, (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] = 1.91, 95% confidence interval [CI] [1.02, 3.57]) and were more than twice as likely to experience nonconsensual sex (aOR = 2.68, 95% CI [1.17, 6.19]). Military students were also more likely to have unprotected sex after drinking alcohol compared to non-military students. These findings indicate military student experiences differ from the non-military population and as such increased understanding can aid in them reaching degree completion. Not only are military students unique in this, Gardner (2009) also suggests doctoral students also represent a more diverse population varying in age, marital status, residential status, and academic participation (full-time or part-time) compared to their homogenous counterparts, undergraduates. Literature encompasses how mentorship, self-efficacy, and generic experiences can play a role in a doctoral academic journey (Devos et al., 2017; Perjessy, 2013; Pifer and Baker, 2016). These findings highlight the unique characteristics of doctoral students yet fail to discern the unique characteristics of military CES doctoral students and how this knowledge can positively impact degree completion. Military students embarking on CES programs face unique challenges and also bring valuable experience to the profession.

Military Culture

According to Hall (2016), a lack of awareness of military culture leaves counselors at a clear disadvantage in knowing how to work with the military population. Hall (2016) also outlines important factors pertinent to military life that may be unfamiliar to counselors external to the military, for example, military culture, deployment, nontraditional family units, and military acronyms. Focus is placed on the complex nature of military roles and how traditional counseling assumptions may conflict with the needs of this population. Hall (2016) approaches the topic of counseling in the military through a traditional gender role lens. This limits the value of her observations because of the significance of “Do not ask, do not tell” and gender bias considerations (DoD, 2010). However, Hall (2016) argues counselors require specialized competence to work with military clients and provides the example of how a counselor must navigate obstacles to confidentiality. For example, a military counselor may be required to disclose to a commanding officer treatment information, which prevents military personnel from seeking mental health treatment on base. Hall (2016) draws attention to the unique nature of military service and acknowledges priorities of the military can supersede the needs of the individual or family, which can influence the counseling experience. Hall (2016) identifies common presenting problems facing military personnel such as stress and PTSD, which supports the argument that counselors familiar with the unique nature of military life will be more successful in meeting their needs.

Hayden, Robertson, and Kennelly (2017) examined the perspectives of counselor educator's recognition of military as a distinct culture and whether examination of elements of the military population should be incorporated into CES programming. Their mixed methods study involved an online survey to address: (a) informed consent, (b) assessing military as a culture, (c) individual and institutional demographics, and (d) current and proposed curricula. The final sample consisted of 60 completed responses. A strength of this research is the methodology and analysis of results were clearly outlined making the study easily replicable (Balkin & Kleist, 2017). Limitations of this research included the respondents only representing 26 states, meaning 24 states were not represented which made the generalizability of the findings a challenge. Also, 80% of respondents were related to someone in the military which introduces bias as they may have preconceived beliefs about the issue's military personnel face. The research findings suggest the military has a unique culture which should be taken into consideration when treating military clients and in order to ensure counselors are competent in working with military clients a wide range of strategies to enhance understanding should be adopted in counseling programs (Hayden et al., 2017).

After a review of multicultural textbooks sourced from the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES)/ American Counseling Association (ACA) syllabi clearinghouse dating from 1997 to 2014 only one textbook listed military populations as a content area (Lee, 2013). From the same clearinghouse, there was no mention of military populations in any of the seventeen syllabi. Findings suggest incorporating military programming into CES education was supported, with 79% of the respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement (Hayden et al., 2017). CES supervisors were identified as being in a position to assist in the development of counselor competency when working with the military culture and counselor competency was seen as essential when attempting to meet the needs of a military population representing its own unique culture.

Military Treatment and Counselor Competency

Military counselors may rely on military experience to build rapport with military clients, which is a luxury civilian counselor's do not have access to. The importance of civilian counselors demonstrating competency while working with military populations is evident (Carrola & Corbin-Burdick, 2015; Hall, 2016; Hall, Garland, Charlton, & Johnson, 2018). A civilian counselor who is unfamiliar with military culture can struggle to develop a therapeutic alliance (Hall et al., 2018). In addition, a civilian counselor may not recognize military rank, and this can be interpreted as incompetence by the military client (Hall, 2016). This lack of competence leads to negative experiences, which may prevent military personnel returning for treatment (Owens et al., 2009). According to Carrola and Corbin-Burdick (2015), it is the responsibility of the counselor to cater to the military experiences of clients rather than considering treatment through a pathological lens that is myopic in nature. Military counselors have the potential to offer greater understanding and awareness of military experiences and subsequently avoid over-pathologizing symptoms of military clients when faced with nontraditional societal responses (Carrola & Corbin-Burdick, 2015).

The Department of Veterans Affairs (2015) reports counselors contribute substantially to the Veterans Affairs ability to deliver high quality patient care to veterans. However, without successful CES graduates, the mental health needs of veterans may not be fully addressed. In addition, CES programs will be ill-equipped to address the unique needs of military veteran students without this research. The Pew Research Center (2011) indicated counseling students entering a counseling program with prior knowledge of the military was unlikely because only a third of Americans report a family member has served or is serving in the military. This lack of exposure to military culture can act as a barrier to services.

CACREP standards include multicultural content in foundational courses yet this seems insufficient to address the needs of the military population when a significant focus of programs is based on experiential learning and exposure to multicultural environments. ACA ethical standards promote the need for a counselor to “actively attempt to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of the clients they serve” (ACA, 2014, p. 4). The ACA *Code of Ethics* also outlines a counselor’s “responsibility to infuse multicultural/diversity competency in their training and supervision practices” (ACA, 2014, F.11.c.). Counseling research indicates clients are more likely to engage in the counseling process if they can relate to the therapist. Yet, action steps to ensure counseling students can accomplish this task are lacking. To accomplish this, counselors hoping to serve the military populations need military coursework to build competency and increase awareness of military culture.

Aligning Academic Programs and Military Culture

The alignment of academic programs to meet the needs of students, institutions, communities and specifically the military is apparent. A groundbreaking means to accomplish this was outlined by DuMars, Bolton, Maleku, and Smith-Osbourne (2015). They describe an institutional initiative that emphasizes the importance of training Master of Science in Social Work students for military social work practice and doctoral students in military resilience research. This initiative focused on how to align academic programming with governing body standards, and population needs. The outcome was a program that has been recognized as one of the leading programs in the country for Social Work looking to service the military. In 2010, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) circulated standards for advanced practice in military Social Work. These standards aligned with the governing *2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS; CSWE, 2008) that promote core competencies including risk assessment, resilience, coping strategies, social support in a military context, and deployment related health problems. The purpose of this initiative was to establish standards of competence in the Social Work profession in terms of knowledge and practice. In 2012, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) developed 12 standards of military social work practice which aligned with the NASW *Code of Ethics.*

To align with these practices academic institutions responded with the incorporation of military coursework into Social Work degree programs. DuMars et al. (2015) conducted one such study that applied a neuroscientific informed resilience theory framework to explore the effects of trauma on nontreatment-referred children and adolescents among military families and tested support interventions on the participants. The study responded to an identified need for military members to receive services (CSWE, 2010; Rubin, 2012). This research highlights the investment the Social Work profession has made toward serving the military population and draws attention for the counseling profession to do the same.

In comparison, there are no governing standards specific to the needs of military personnel for counseling professionals. Stebnicki, Clemmons-James, and Leierer (2017) illustrate this in their research on accredited counseling program content. Stebnicki et al. (2017) conducted a survey of military counseling content and curriculum among CACREP and Council on Rehabilitation Education accredited programs. Of the 23.4 % of respondents (n=85) 100% denied existence of (a) certificate program, (b) specialty track, or (c) degree program that related to military counseling. Of the 85 respondents, 34 schools (4.7%) had developed military counseling courses independent of the counseling program. And over two-thirds of the 85 programs covered military counseling as content in other areas of the curriculum. This demonstrates the lack of focus on military population needs by accrediting bodies. Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC) who want to offer the military services face obstacles when attempting to access military populations as a result. Access to military jobs is largely dominated by professions such as Social Work and Psychology. State credentialing for counselors like social workers and psychologists permits licensed professionals to diagnose mental health disorders in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and yet without changes to legislation, access to military jobs remains prohibitive for LPC's compared to these professions. DuMars et al. (2015) highlight one reason this will continue is the counseling profession has yet to establish military competence in the same way social work and psychology professions have do so. For example, military coursework is not part of the CACREP curriculum. Yet, this should not negate the real need for counseling services in the military. Nor should it justify a rejection of the already established standards of competence the counseling profession has established. Military focused research contributing to the counseling profession is limited. As CACREP seeks to garner federal jobs for counselors who have largely been blocked from pursuing career opportunities in the military. One could argue that a means to make this goal a reality is to demonstrate an investment in the military population by creating similar standards as CSWE (2010) for the counseling profession. Establishing governing standards that incorporate military coursework is one step toward meeting the mental health needs of the military population, but this step alone is insufficient. Additional barriers such as stigma toward mental health treatment exist within military culture.

Stigma and Access to Mental Health Treatment

Military personnel frequently face stigma when seeking mental health treatment (Sharp et al., 2015). This stigma may occur in a professional or civilian setting and can lead to negative consequences for military personnel (Clement et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Sharp et al., 2015). As a result, often mental health issues go undiagnosed and untreated to avoid such stigma. Stigma is a barrier that can detrimentally impact the individual needing treatment as well as those around them. Military populations experience higher rates of mental illness such as PTSD and therefore it is imperative to identify ways in which to make mental healthcare more accessible to this population (Fischer, 2015).

Stigma experienced by military personnel seeking counseling services include discomfort with discussing mental health problems, beliefs promoted by military culture, witnessing treatment seekers' experiences, career concerns, stigma, leadership problems, and practical barriers such as a lack of social support, a lack of leadership support, and perceived symptom severity (Zinzow et al., 2013). Zinzow et al. (2013) suggested increasing treatment-facilitating interventions, reframing treatment-inhibiting perceptions, change leader behaviors, and employ testimonials. One means to reframe and overcome this stigma is by ensuring military counselor educators are accessible to serve the military population. By matriculating military students, the negative attitudes associated with utilizing mental health care such as prior bad experiences can be addressed (Owens et al., 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2009).

Barriers to Military Mental Healthcare

Waitzkin et al. (2018) clarified the experiences that led military personnel to seek care outside military institutions. This mixed methods study investigated 233 active duty GI participants in the United States, Afghanistan, South Korea, and Germany from 2013-

2016. Respondents were Male (82%) and Female (18%) with 58% ranging from 18 to 26 years of age, represented multiple races. The majority of respondents were in the Army (64%), low ranking (82%), and had an academic background up to some college (78%). A strength of this study is the sample size and focus on military population. A limitation of this research is the sourcing of participants occurred via the utilization of one hotline, indicating the research is not generalizable.

Waitzkin et al. (2018) found participants reported a lack of accessible and trustworthy services, insufficient and unresponsive services (93%), fear of reprisal for seeking services (56%), mistrust of command (48%), and military sexual trauma (22%). Military sexual trauma could be interpreted in two ways, (i) victims may want to distance themselves from military treatment seeking a civilian counselor as they associate the military with the trauma, or (ii) seek a counselor with military competence in the civilian world who can appreciate the environment within which the assault took place. Ultimately, the findings suggest military personnel have multiple reasons to seek services in the civilian sector and it is incumbent upon the counseling field to invest in military competent counseling. One way to secure military competent counselors is to encourage military students to pursue CES education.

Waitzkin et al. (2018) recommended mental health professionals balance obligations to patients and military command while balancing ethical obligations that can become barriers to care. The ability to accomplish this is dependent upon the counselor being able to successfully navigate these professional obligations. This study builds on the recommendations of Waitzkin et al. (2018) and aligns with their findings that stigma, a negative impact of seeking care on one's career, beliefs that care would not be effective, and lack of appropriate services are barriers to care. As such, this research will begin to understand military students which is essential when attempting to reduce these obstacles for military populations.

Another attempt to reduce obstacles to care was established in 2006, The Civilian Medical Resources Network (TCMRN) operates as a civilian resource within the United States made up on professionals (psychiatry, psychology, social work, medical doctors, and public health) that offer active duty GIs an alternative to the military health and mental health care in the United States (Waitzkin & Noble, 2009). The purpose of the TCMRN is to provide services to the unmet needs of military personnel that otherwise goes untreated. TCMRN has grown significantly in recent years indicating a need for military informed civilian healthcare providers which this study is designed to support.

Military personnel also seek civilian services to avoid losing out on benefits. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has not provided disability payments for pre-existing personality disorders because qualifying events are seen as service-related or service-aggravated only (Weiser 2010). This was a cost saving for the VA of up to $1.14 billion annually in 2010 based on a complex calculation by the United Stated Accountability Office reflecting recruitment and training costs impacted by personality disorder discharges (Weiser 2010). It is well documented that mental health screening for entry into the military is limited and has been for some time (Hoge et al., 2005; Pols & Oak, 2007). In 2016, in response to Section 593 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 (Public Law 114-92) revisions to the accessions screening process to align mental health and physical screenings was reviewed (DoD, 2016). To expand preaccession mental health assessment practices findings recommended a minimum of 90 additional full-time psychologists costing approximately $85-$136 million and this did not include the additional time it would take to complete the additional testing estimated at an additional 1-7 hours (DoD, 2016). Ultimately, no changes were recommended to mental health accession assessments in 2016.

Military personnel and their families face losing both financial and health benefits in the event mental health disorders are introduced (Kors, 2007). In addition, limited accession screening can lead to those with personality disorders entering the military and needing care. Subsequently, it is in the best interest of military personnel to conceal their mental health status and seek civilian services to avoid these potential losses. To meet the needs of this population, the counseling profession should seek to expand military competent counselors. This research will address this need by developing greater understanding about counseling students who can serve military populations in a way only those familiar with the military can.

Observations

The literature fails to identify characteristics of military CES students. The literature fails to determine how academic institutions can meet military CES student needs to increase matriculation and graduation rates for this population. Although research begins to explore the inclusion of military curriculum a more comprehensive understanding of this topic is needed (Hayden et al., 2017). The literature addresses stigma facing military mental healthcare and acknowledges stigma is not unique or new to the military (Lambert & Morgan, 2009). However, literature fails to suggest ways to bridge the gap between treatment and military personnel that need it. Hutchinson and Banks-Williams (2006) argued stigma is the most significant obstacle counselors' face when seeking to provide services to the military. By supporting military students in their endeavors to pursue a counseling career the counseling profession can take a step toward overcoming this obstacle.

The literature suggests the military have assistance in pursuing academic goals, yet little is known about how this impacts military CES doctoral students. The literature fails to consider how understanding military CES doctoral students' academic journey can support an increase in future graduation rates. The literature fails to identify how military counselors can meet the needs of their communities.

Research Gap

This study will address the gap in research that exists when attempting to understand the unique traits and characteristics of military CES doctoral students and how knowing this information can impact future military student's academic journeys in CES programs. To develop an understanding of the military doctoral CES student's academic journey I will now outline my approach to the research and why I have chosen to conduct a qualitative study to achieve the most beneficial outcome. Future qualitative research exploring the experiences of military veteran CES doctoral students toward degree completion is warranted (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2013; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). To address this gap in the research, I will now discuss the methodology that will be used to develop further understanding of this phenomenon. The hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research methodology aligns with the identified research questions, and framework but diverges from the constructivist approach of Perjessy (2013) and mixed methods approach of Hayden et al., (2017) to shed more light on the lived experiences of the students. In doing so, the methodology will more closely align with the research purpose to truly develop understanding of the student experience in order to benefit student, academic institution, and counseling profession alike.

Critiques

Although military students have received support in the form of financial assistance to encourage ongoing academic pursuits there is evidence to suggest this may not be enough. Military healthcare is designed to address all of the healthcare needs of military populations, yet few studies have specifically examined how the hidden need of military mental health is being met. The social work profession has demonstrated how academic institutions can invest in programming to meet military needs, yet the counseling profession falls short in comparison. Although the stigma of mental healthcare is widely known, and attempts have been made to reduce mental health stigma, evidence suggests negative career consequences as a result of mental health diagnosis will sustain the stigma which has so long plagued this profession. As someone who has seen first-hand the need for military personnel to receive mental health treatment it is imperative that the counseling profession do something to bridge this gap in services.

Summary and Conclusions

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) suggested student experiences can add to the body of knowledge about CES students by creating an understanding of the obstacles they face prior to graduation. Arcuri (2016) advocated for increasing awareness of the role of supervisors in the development of counselors-in-training within a military framework. This furthers dialogue initially introduced by Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) to explore a population whose diverse voices can address a gap in the literature about CES doctoral students and their journey to degree completion. Specifically, this research will add to the body of knowledge about military students investing in a profession that seeks to address social issues where an established need is evident. This aligns with the gap in research pointed out by Protivnak and Foss (2009) that suggests future qualitative research of CES doctoral students is needed.

Rationale behind the justification of this research can be viewed from a multi-dimensional perspective. When considering military student needs it has been established that they are unique and as such further research can support an increased understanding of this population. That is to say a military student’s academic environment, personal priorities, financial assistance, and employment demands can impact their ability to reach degree completion. In addition, barriers to seeking mental health services such as civilian counselor competency and stigma related to mental health treatment detract from military personnel seeking services. There is a demonstrated need for military personal to receive treatment due to the prevalence of PTSD and combat related mental health diagnoses associated with military populations (Hom, Stanley, Schneider, & Joiner Jr., 2017). A systematic review of help-seeking and mental health service utilization among military service members. *Clinical psychology review*, *53*, 59-78. Kivari, Oliffe, Borgen, & Westwood, 2018). To address barriers regarding stigma, career impact, and counselor competency this research will seek feedback from military students and advocate for changes in academic programming and societal norms to reflect the findings.

Research demonstrates the benefits military populations can experience from academic institutions investing in military related programming. Military populations are encouraged to participate in further education and have a need for mental healthcare in a civilian setting. The literature review has shown military populations face barriers to mental healthcare which can be detrimental to their career and family. Despite barriers to care, military personnel are identified as a population with significant mental health needs which I believe the counseling profession has a duty to address.

The lack of military focused programming is evident in accredited programs. Instead, institutions often include military education in multicultural course content which could be seen as insufficient based on the prevalence of mental health and demonstrated success of professions that have invested in military education. The skills and competence these students will bring to the profession will address military needs. To accomplish this, academic institutions must acknowledge military mental health needs and develop an increased understanding of military CES students to increase recruitment, retention, and graduation rates. In an effort to determine what needs military students have, when seeking to complete a CES degree the methodological orientation of this study will now be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of military students on their journey to degree completion in a counselor education doctoral program. By identifying patterns and themes that exist, this research can inform academic institutions and CES doctoral programs of the potential contributors and barriers to military students' degree completion. This research can also serve to encourage future military students to apply to and enroll in a CES doctoral programs by acknowledging the barriers they face and creating a pathway to degree completion. This research will contribute to the current body of literature about CES doctoral programs to assist in program development and ultimately increase the likelihood of meeting the unique needs of military personnel who utilize community mental health services.

Major sections of this chapter include a reiteration of the research question. I will then define key terminology, central tenets and concepts of the study, and explain how they pertain to the phenomenon. Key terms will include Dasein, mineness, situated freedom, phenomenology and hermeneutics. I will provide rationale explaining why a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach was chosen and justify the suitability of this research approach for this study. The role of the researcher will be defined, incorporating the personal and professional implications of adopting this role with the identified topic. Finally, ethical issues related to the study, conflicts of interest, and justification for the chosen research approach will be given.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion? An additional question included: What personal characteristics positively contributed to academically successful military CES students?

Central Concept of the Study

The literature review for this study demonstrated there is evidence that doctoral students possess unique characteristics that influence academic success among doctoral students in CES programs such as determination, support networks, and work-life balance (Hinkle, Larussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014; Perjessy, 2013; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; West, Gokalp, Pena, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011). As these common characteristics can be associated with doctoral degree completion, it is reasonable to consider how the military CES student's journey to degree completion may influence these responses.

This study will contribute toward the field of counseling and counselor education by developing understanding about the journey toward degree completion for military students. This in turn will benefit communities who seek to serve the military population by ensuring military personnel have access to CES programs (Baker & Moore, 2015).

It is envisioned that academic institutions will show an increase in graduation rates for military who seek to pursue a CES education. This study will have a long-term impact on the counseling profession by promoting the need for ongoing research on military in counseling and how they can benefit communities. Social change can occur whereby academic institutions can provide programming that meets the needs of military students. Online classes that are flexible will reduce obstacles for military students facing time management challenges. These obstacles to graduation for military students can be identified and eliminated. Military student's representative of a diverse population will have greater access to degree completion. Students will see previous barriers have been removed creating an opportunity for them to go to school that would otherwise not be possible. Educators and supervisors will be able to recognize the characteristics of successful military CES doctoral students who will shape the future of the profession.

Identifying the Research Tradition

Phenomenology

Phenomenology facilitates the exploration of a student's experience, allowing me as the researcher to uncover the presence of unique criteria in the student's responses. By considering how the responses are shaped by the student's experience and recognizing how a student's journey is influenced by their unique experiences, a phenomenological approach is shown to be well-suited for this study. By devoting attention to dominant themes that surface across student responses, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved. This understanding can inform faculty and administrators of CES programs regarding the unique needs of the student population. This, in turn may help them provide students with adequate resources and support services to promote academic success.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that has philosophical and psychological underpinnings and derives from the Greek work *phainomenon,* which means to appear (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). Phenomenology explores the experience of individuals living a specific phenomenon, thus creating a deeper understanding of the experiences they relay. To reach this deeper understanding, the researcher must attempt to see the experiences through the lens of the participant. Van Manen (1994) recommended obtaining vivid descriptions of the lived experience in the context of time, space, and relationships to accomplish this deeper level of understanding. Phenomenology tends to focus on the experiences of several people which differentiates the approach from a narrative qualitative research approach which tends to focus on the experience of one person (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research is also unique in how the focus remains on *how* things appear not *what* appears (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). By focusing on how the experience appears, phenomenological inquiry places emphasis on personal significance, whether the experience is derived from practical or instinctive meaning. Van Manen further supported this definition by considering phenomenology from a human science perspective. Van Manen suggested phenomenology offers accounts of human relations as they are lived rather than theoretical or empirical observations. To better understand the lived experiences of military CES students and the factors contributing to successful degree completion, semistructured interviews will be used to gather rich data.

Descriptive Phenomenology

Husserl (1859-1938) developed descriptive phenomenology, which is based on the belief that human experience is valuable and as such, qualifies to be the subject of scientific research (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The primary question Husserl asked is "what do we know as persons?" and focus was placed on understanding and describing the experience from the perspective of those who have lived it and can describe it (Polit & Beck, 2008). Descriptive phenomenology seeks to ascertain the first-person perspective so that the researcher can adopt an empathic position with participants. Husserl defined four steps of descriptive phenomenology: *bracketing, intuiting, analyzing,* and *describing* (Polit & Beck, 2008). *Bracketing,* which involved researchers putting aside their personal assumptions, preconceived notions, and theoretical beliefs to be able to discover a true understanding of a phenomenon. In the event *bracketing* does not occur, Husserl argued a researcher could not fully understand the phenomenon. For example, a researcher who engages in counseling at a local college chooses to study the phenomenon of doctoral student experiences. Before interviewing the study participants (doctoral students), I must examine my own experiences, emotions, and thoughts regarding my own doctoral student experiences and my ability to build rapport with these students. Once she identifies those experiences, emotions, and thoughts she can account for how they will influence the research process, data analysis, and the conclusions he forms from the research findings. Husserl advocates for *intuiting* which requires the researcher to remain open to the meanings attributed to the phenomenon by the participant who experienced it rather than imposing personal bias (Polit & Beck, 2008). This will enable the research to reflect the experience of the respondents rather than the personal influences of the researcher. Husserl also referenced *eidetic structures* or common themes that are identified by participants who have lived the same experience. Lopez and Willis (2004) submit *eidetic structures* should be generalized to contribute to the science of phenomenology-based research. Finally, Husserl suggested *analyzing and describing* the research process that will support the interpretations made by the researcher.

Heidegger (1889-1976) was a student of Husserl who detached from Husserl's original descriptive phenomenological approach. Heidegger did not subscribe to a researcher's ability to *bracket* their experiences. Rather Heidegger believed a researcher's background and personal life experiences would enhance their ability to interpret the meaning of a phenomenon. Heidegger claimed a researcher's ability to include context into their findings is essential to gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Heidegger coined the term *lifeworld* to define how an individual's life is always influenced by their surrounding world and the two can never be separated. For example, the social, cultural, and historical experiences impact how individuals interpret and contextualize events in all areas of life. According to Heidegger, meaning making derives from previous experiences and not in a vacuum from them. As such, the meaning attributed to research is influenced by the researcher's background and experiences and this occurs throughout the research process. This interpretive phenomenology and Heidegger's conceptual framework will now be outlined.

Interpretive Phenomenology

Interpretive phenomenology derives from the work of Heidegger and Gadamer (a student of Heidegger) and attempts to establish meaning through the interpretation of experiences from being in the world (Ironside, 2005). Interpretive phenomenology differs from descriptive phenomenology because the focus is on "what is being?" In answering this question, the researcher focuses on the interpretation and understanding of the experience rather than simply describing the experience (Polit & Beck, 2008). *Situated freedom* is a term used in interpretive research to recognize a person's ability to make choices but acknowledges these choices are not made with absolute freedom. Rather, the choices are influenced by life experiences such as a car accident or wedding and these experiences impact the decision-making process. Lopez and Willis (2004) point out how *situated freedom* involves a researcher *initially* describing the meaning of the participant being in the world and then how these meanings influence the choices they make.

Coconstitutionality is a term coined by Heidegger to define how the researcher interprets research through a blended lens. What is articulated by the participant blends with the knowledge of the researcher. The researcher's questions and the researcher's interpretation of the participant's experiences blend to create meaning (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researcher's knowledge and meaning making can influence the direction of the research and line of inquiry. Within this line of inquiry, the researcher guides the research to ensure useful information is garnered when exploring a phenomenon. Without the researcher's guidance, the research may not produce information that is useful to furthering the field of knowledge.

Phenomenology and CES Doctoral Research

When conducting research on a topic that has not previously been explored phenomenological research is a good fit because it provides the framework to delve into a deeper understanding of the identified phenomenon. Narrative research typically focuses on a chain of experiences and the way a participant makes sense of the experience. After considering the value of this approach, I was able to rule it out because I believe it will broaden the scope of my research beyond what I want to look at. I will be conducting qualitative research where the focus is on understanding the specific phenomenon (student experience) being studied rather than generalizing the findings to other populations (Hoy & Adams, 2015). The student experience is not science but can be considered an art that reflects the human experience. As such, the response to challenges, rewards, and obstacles can be considered contextually, to expand understanding of the student experience and appropriate methods to address student needs. Phenomenology provides a method to delve deeper into the student experience from the beginning to the end of their doctoral experience. In doing so, specific information pertaining to the challenges and rewards of their doctoral experience can be garnered and further knowledge and understanding can be elicited from participants. As CES researchers begin to examine the profession, they must attempt to elicit deeper understanding and meaning from student experiences. The practice of interpreting meaning from experiences is referred to as hermeneutics.

Hermeneutic research focuses on theoretical and practical ways in which to interpret data (van Manen, 1994). Hermeneutics involves interpreting text, such as the text from interview transcripts, to identify common themes (Prasad, 2005). In doing so, the researcher can gain deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon. By identifying common themes through the analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes the researcher can determine if multiple participants had similar experiences thereby gaining new knowledge about the life experience or phenomenon.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach will attempt to develop understanding and in doing so, common threads and characteristics of the phenomenon can be identified. By understanding perspectives, I can contextualize decisions and actions and interpret their meaning. One means to conduct phenomenological hermeneutic research is by adopting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) referred to as a qualitative methodology. Hermeneutic phenomenology relies on a combination of both interpretive and descriptive approaches to lived experience. Van Manen (1994) explains how the research method is descriptive (phenomenological) when attempting to let the experience tell its own story and interpretive (hermeneutic) in the belief that there are no such thing as un-interpreted phenomena. The *hermeneutic circle* recognizes the never-ending possibilities that can occur during the interpretation of text. The *hermeneutical circle* does not involve a structured step-by-step approach, rather the researcher must be fluid in their repeated analysis of text allowing for unanticipated themes to present themselves and patterns to emerge naturally. The *hermeneutic circle* provides the researcher with the ability to conceptualize the phenomenon, by moving from a part of the experience to the whole experience and back again. This process can lead to an increased understanding about the text and subsequent phenomenon. As the researcher analyzes the interview transcripts of participants relaying their experiences, they reflect on what they have read, reflect on their own experience in relation to what they read, and then reread the transcript to find new meaning. By rereading the text and identifying themes that present with each cycle the researcher can interpret and develop new meaning to the content. In addition, themes that present in one text can be identified as present or absent across all texts. By determining the prevalence or vagueness of themes in texts, patterns can emerge from which the researcher can attribute conclusions. Once the researcher determines no more patterns or themes will emerge, they have reached *saturation*. This *hermeneutic circle* leads the researcher to identify patterns in the text that create a deeper understanding of the phenomenon within the context of their own world, considering the phenomenon through a blended lens of the participant's experiences and their own.

Heideggerian Hermeneutics and CES Doctoral Research

To understand the lived experiences of CES doctoral students and their journey toward degree completion a Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology is well-suited as the method of inquiry for this study due to the embedded focus on developing understanding. A CES doctoral student's journey to completion is significantly influenced by past and present academic experiences, perceptions of progress, and the desire to achieve degree completion. Phenomenology requires the researcher to describe the experience as it is, to get a true understanding of the phenomena. Heidegger promotes the importance of context in accomplishing this task, specifically to acknowledge the background, priorities, values, and beliefs of the student to more accurately understand their present and future.

The hermeneutic circle can be applied to this research when the researcher analyzes the transcripts from CES doctoral student interviews. As the researcher, I must recognize and *bracket* how my personal CES doctoral journey and experiences may influence my ability to analyze and interpret the text. In exploring CES student journeys, I hope to develop greater understanding about the CES student's academic journey, reflecting on their own experience, rereading, and then discovering new meaning. At the point all themes and patterns are exhausted, saturation occurs. The qualitative approach Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, focuses the research on identifying patterns that occur in student interview transcripts who embark on a shared life experience, that of the CES doctoral journey to degree completion. I may discover eidetic structures during content analysis, or I may realize that a *phenomenological attitude* is present.

Students frequently struggle with obstacles such as finances, academic competence, and school-life balance. By exploring how dasein exists, Heidegger has created a means to resolve internal conflicts. When specifically applied to students in this research, the internal conflict about why they have embarked on the doctoral journey. Doctoral students may consider dropping out due to feelings of incompetence, inadequacy, being overwhelmed, or unable to meet financial demands. Students may feel like they lack the ability to complete the doctoral degree, they misread the academic requirements, or lack the motivation to keep going. This self-doubt and lack of control is framed by Heidegger as the essence of human existence. Heidegger frames this state as existence between freedom and submission to our world (Wrathall, 2005). By acknowledging a lack of complete control over “there”, students acknowledge they do not have complete control over all elements of their life and this acceptance can relieve self-imposed pressures on the student that they are failing or unable to complete the degree.

The self-imposed pressures students experience because of the conflict between freedom and things one has no control over are framed by Heidegger as *moods or disposedness* (Wrathall, 2005). Disposedness is a means for the students in this research to reflect their submission to their situation or environment acknowledging it matters. Dasein acknowledges the status of being-in-the-world is not something a student has complete control over, but the student imposes this academic environment onto their state of being, which is known as *situated freedom. Moods* exist within this situated freedom and reflect the encounters a student may have in their life. For a CES doctoral student, mood reflects all aspects of their lived experience including both positive and negative influences such as feeling of incompetence and inadequacy due to poor academic grades, or feelings of support and motivation due to peer support groups and participation in mentoring roles. *Mineness* acknowledges the student’s lived experiences reflect how they exist in the world, incorporating their academic role with alternative life roles such as that of parent, employee and sibling. Mineness can be an essential component of the student’s ability to reach degree completion. If a student’s existence is dictated by external factors, such as the needs of their children, mineness can become diminished. Mineness for the student may not reemerge until after degree completion when an improved work-life balance can be found.

Research Rationale

I aligned with Heidegger’s belief that a person (*Dasein*) exists within the context of their past experiences and that every person’s existence is shaped by their beliefs, culture, and interactions with the world. To develop a deeper understanding about phenomena, I needed to acknowledge and incorporate these past experiences, influences, and beliefs into the research process. To ignore these factors would be a failure on my part to truly understand and develop deeper meaning behind the phenomena. By acknowledging that a person is not a blank slate but rather shaped by the existence they have experienced, the context for present behaviors, emotional responses, and thought processes can be harnessed. I subscribed to the belief that to capture the meaning behind lived experiences it is essential to accurately interpret a person’s existence. Heidegger’s framework lays out a means to accomplish this task. For example, Heidegger’s *mineness* tenet successfully defines identity within a framework that aligns with social norms. The implication that each person is responsible for their own actions and reactions, accomplishments and accountability. This presupposition aligns with the rationale that students will face academic stressors, accomplishments, and challenges along their academic journey and how they respond to these experiences is shaped by their past experiences. Similarly, societal expectations prohibit cheating such as plagiarism and determine academic standards such as punctuality, professional communications with academic staff, and the use of alcohol during class. The precept of *mineness* reflects the belief that students own their identity within this context.

Rationale for the Chosen Tradition

By applying a Heideggerian hermeneutic approach to this research topic I have demonstrated how the research method is suitable to unearth a deeper understanding of the doctoral student's journey. By inviting CES doctoral students to share about their lived experiences, the Heideggerian research approach will provide the framework for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of doctoral degree completion. It may also uncover how academic institutions can better meet the needs of these students leading to greater graduation rates. The concepts of Dasein, moods, disposedness, and mineness were defined to support the appropriate application of this approach to the student's academic journey.

Terminology

To fully comprehend a phenomenon and acknowledge vocabulary unique to this study the following section will provide a summary of key terminology. Terms include bracketing, coconstitutionality, content analysis, Dasein, descriptive phenomenology, eidetic structures, hermeneutic phenomenology, interpretive phenomenological analysis, intuiting, mineness, moods or disposedness, phenomenological attitude, and situated freedom. These terms were identified as relevant to the study and additional terms may be added following content analysis.

Bracketing: Derives from the Husserlian approach to phenomenological research and involves researchers putting aside their personal assumptions, preconceived notions, and theoretical beliefs to be able to discover a true understanding of a phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2008).

Coconstitutionality: A term coined by Heidegger to define how the researcher interprets research through a blended lens.

Content analysis: Derives from the Husserlian approach to phenomenological research and is a technique used for data analysis in which the review of text content leads to themes and patterns being identified (Lichtman, 2012).

Dasein: Derives from the German *Da* meaning "there" and *Sein* meaning "being" and refers to the question "what does it mean to exist?" (Wrathall, 2005). According to Heidegger human beings possess a unique characteristic, being able to reflect on their state of existence. Heidegger also referred to how a "being" can understand how they relate to others in the world. Heidegger proposed beings can develop understanding about the lived experience. The *Dasein* is constantly changing, self-interpreting, understanding and this leads to evolution. By developing knowledge through existing and acting in acceptable ways Dasein understands how to develop meaningful relationships with other entities (Wrathall, 2005).

Descriptive phenomenology: The belief that human experience is valuable and as such, qualifies to be the subject of scientific research (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Eidetic structures: Derives from the Husserlian approach to phenomenological research and refers to common themes that are identified by participants who have lived the same experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Hermeneutic phenomenology: A qualitative research approach combining interpretive (hermeneutic) methods and descriptive (phenomenological) methods for examining the lived experiences of a specific group of people (Hatch, 2002).

Interpretive phenomenological analysis: The approach and examination of the lived experiences of individuals (Lichtman, 2012).

Intuiting: Requires the researcher to remain open to the meanings attributed to the phenomenon by the participant who experienced it rather than imposing personal bias (Polit & Beck, 2008).

Mineness: Derives from Heidegger's phenomenological theory as a trait of Dasein. Mineness refers to one's identity and existence, acknowledging that one's existence is theirs alone (Wrathall, 2005).

Moods or *disposedness*: Derives from Heidegger's approach to phenomenology and refers to a "state-of-mind" where past experiences can influence the present. The German translation is *uberfallen* which means to fall upon suddenly, to surprise, to seize indicating it is not simply an isolated emotion but influenced by action, or the environment (Wrathall, 2005). Applying this term to this research, acknowledges that the CES doctoral students do not experience their journey in isolation, rather the journey is affected by their past and present.

Phenomenological attitude: The same phenomenon can be interpreted in the same way by multiple individuals (Giorgi, 2009).

Situated freedom: A term used in interpretive research to recognize a person's ability to make choices but acknowledges these choices are not made with absolute freedom. Rather, the choices are influenced by life experiences such as a car accident or wedding and these experiences impact the decision-making process (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

The Researcher

As researcher, I am motivated to complete this research, it was my responsibility to thoroughly explore the topic, including prior literature and studies pertaining to the subject matter. Sourcing of participants was done anonymously and there were no personal or professional relationships that existed with any of the identified participants. I engaged in communication about the implications of such a relationship with my Dissertation Chair prior to proceeding. In the event no conflict of interest or power differential was seen to exist I obtained the participants' informed consents to proceed with the study. Throughout the study, ongoing communications with participants occurred. No conflicts of power presented itself, and therefore I did not need to defer to the Dissertation Committee to acknowledge it or determine whether to continue to interview the participant. I conducted semistructured interviews, as I participated in the research within this interviewer role. I also did not need to acknowledge any power differentials that presented themselves in this setting. No participant identified as a past or current instructor, supervisor, or direct report so they did not need to be removed from the participant pool and a letter was not needed to inform them of the decision.

Researcher Bias

As researcher, I am a Caucasian, female in a counselor education and supervision doctoral program at the time I conducted this research and therefore needed to be mindful of how my identity could bias the research. In this role, it was important to remain objective and consult with professional peers when in doubt. I endeavored to remain objective by utilizing a journal to reflect on the process and request my Chair review transcriptions and journal notes to avoid prejudice in my interpretation of data. I had the assumption that doctoral programs do not provide sufficient support for military students such as mentoring, caring, respect, and acknowledgement of their role within the military. I assumed the role of military student is more challenging than that of other students, and I saw military students experiencing feelings of frustration due to multiple roles distracting from their academic pursuits. Moustakas (1994) pointed out the importance of suspending such judgement when conducting a phenomenological study to be able to see the phenomenon for what it is at a deeper level and avoid bias interfering with the research. To this end I documented in my journal reflections of this effort which I discussed with my committee chair. Additional ways in which bias was limited in this research will now be discussed.

Addressing Researcher Bias

I conducted interviews with participants previously unknown to me which prevented preconceived beliefs becoming inserted into the data inadvertently. Despite these efforts, I avoided introducing bias by shaping the understanding of the participants experience by limiting feedback during the interviews. I also bracketed ideas and conducted semistructured interviews which limited bias by ensuring all participants were asked the same initial questions. However, follow up questions could have introduced bias because they derived from my personal interpretation of the interview transcript. To account for this form of bias I justified any follow up questions to my dissertation chair.

A researcher can fail to be specific in a phenomenological study which can lead to misinterpretation of data. This misinterpretation can be viewed as researcher bias. But this is a double-edged sword, because in failing to provide specifics the researcher is opening the research up to criticism about how the research is really contributing to the field of knowledge. Therefore, in this study I endeavored to provide specifics to more fully address the findings of the research and avoid bias.

Ethical Considerations

The ACA (2014) outlines the ethical behavior and conduct in which to aspire to as professionals in the *Code of Ethics.* Ethical considerations extend to the role of the researcher, participant, boundaries between the two, and publication of research literature (ACA, 2014, Section G). To establish this as ethical research, I receive approval from Walden University's Internal Review Board prior to conducting the research to set the precedent that the research has met ethical obligations. In addition, I was transparent in all communications, documented obstacles to the research process and consulted when needed with my Dissertation Committee and scholastic peers about how to overcome obstacles in an ethical manner.

In the role of interviewer, I endeavored to personify integrity and remained objective by utilizing a journal to reflect on the process and requested my Chair review transcriptions to avoid prejudice in my interpretation of data. As researcher, I endeavored to seek the truth, and be honest and trustworthy by remaining objective and consulting with professional peers when in doubt.

Methodology

Identification of a Population

For this study, CES military doctoral students were the target group of interest. The criterion for sample selection was any retired, active duty, or reserve military personnel who are CES students currently attending or have graduated within 12 months from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP) doctoral program. Students may have attended the CES program in either a part-time or full-time capacity. Excluded from this population are any counseling students who were not enrolled in a CACREP program, those note able to identify as military and anyone who graduated over 12 months ago.

Saturation

Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) indicated qualitative studies consistently fail to substantiate the reason for the sample size. Marshall et al. (2013) recommend 6-10 participants for a phenomenological study to reach saturation. This has shaped my choice in the number of participants needed for a qualitative study and I identified six participants for this study. I adopted a convenience sampling design to identify and recruit participants for this study. This single-stage sampling approach involved identifying participants through academic databases that meet the identified population criteria and were available and willing to participate in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By utilizing six participants, I found a homogenous participant sample that will allow me to examine the group in detail (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Smith et al. (2009) states this small sample is optimal when dealing with a homogenous group that is specialized, in terms of doctoral program and military status. I utilized email for invitations and informed consent communications (Appendix B and Appendix C).

Purposeful sampling met the study requirements. I planned to identify any retired, active duty, or reserve military personnel who were CES students currently attending or have graduated within 12 months from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program (CACREP). Students attended the CES program in either a part-time or full-time capacity. I contacted ten potential participants and interviewed six. By selecting a purposeful sampling approach, I identified eight participants to participate in my research. By utilizing six participants, I found a homogenous participant sample that allowed me to examine the group in detail (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) states this small sample is optimal when dealing with a homogenous group that is specialized, such as a group made up of doctoral students with military status.

I contacted participants via email to participate in my research interview. I sent an invitation to participate (See Appendix B). Once they confirmed interest, I emailed an informed consent, using the verbatim Internal Review Board document. Once they responded via email that they consented to participate, I scheduled a time and place to conduct the interview in a safe and secure location via phone. Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, and Korcha (2016) point out phone interviews are a viable means to gather qualitative research data and can serve as a medium to cultivate rapport, allowing the interviewer to connect with the participant; be responsive to participant responses, and communicate appreciation for the participant's contribution. Video conference adding the additional benefit of being able to see the participant and observe physical responses, which increases the ability to build rapport, and read nonverbal cues (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). However, video conferences proved too complex for participants who shared technical difficulties with video conference accessibility, so phone interviews were adopted instead.

Prior to the interview and upon completion of the interview, I explained to participants that they have the right to discontinue participation in the study at any time without penalty. I conducted phone interviews via iPhone and recorded the interview via digital recorder to be able to review the interview transcript following the interview and secure the content of the interview in a password protected format. To protect participant privacy, I used pseudonyms in all transcripts and documentation pertaining to the interviews. I informed all participants that I would be available via email, phone, or video conference for any questions. The interview setting was accessible and appropriate environmentally (no loud external noises) to accommodate a video conference for 45 minutes. The video conference began with introductions and a demographic questionnaire to establish triangulation of data sources. The interview structure followed my preapproved interview guide which incorporated an introduction and closing statement (Appendix A). The following statement also included external resources in the event participants experienced emotional distress as a result of participation in the study. Although no participants stated they experienced distress, the external resources were still provided to them upon completion of the interview.

Participants Exit the Study

By debriefing participants post interview about next steps, including how to reach the interviewer with follow up questions, how to verify transcription, and how to find support for academic stressors the researcher can uphold ethical standards (ACA, 2014). By referring participants to academic resources, continuity of care is ensured which is another ethical responsibility for the researcher as a counseling professional per the ACA *Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014).

Instrumentation

The interview guidance offered the participants included the number of interviews, length of each interview, interview questions, and rationale behind the interview process. To ensure content rigor semistructured interviews were the primary data collection method. Data was saved in password protected files in the iCloud which was also password protected. All participant transcripts were saved utilizing a number to indicate the number in order in which they were interviewed, no other self-identifying information was saved to protect participant anonymity. All participants were informed that the Dissertation Committee, Walden IRB and researcher will have access to the files prior to the interviews being conducted. In the event a participant has concerns about the confidentiality of the transcript or identifying information their data will be erased and a record of this will be sent to them via email. By adopting this approach, the participants were encouraged to share their experiences about the desired topic without fear of how the information will be used or concerns about excessive structure impeding their ability to share personal experiences (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). A semistructured approach provided an opportunity for me to steer the topic to ensure irrelevant information can be kept to a minimum. I found this helpful in keeping on topic but also found some participants misunderstood questions. By conducting a semistructured interview in this way, I hoped to collect data from where I could elicit assumptions and meaning from the experiences (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that derived from research conducted by Perjessy (2013). The open-ended questions served to get the participant talking about their academic experiences. Follow up questions provided an opportunity to probe for further information if responses were unclear or provided limited data (Charmaz, 2006). To develop credibility the responses were compared to those responses Perjessy (2013) received in her research on women and their doctoral journey. Creating an apple to apples comparison of the two populations.

To ensure content rigor feedback from peers and a review of prior research supported the design and number of research questions (Perjessy, 2013). Ideally, interviews would have been face-to-face as this format can create ambience between researcher and participant (Smith et al., 2009; Opdenakker, 2006). In-person interviews can also allow for verbal and nonverbal cues to be observed by the researcher, generating more in-depth data (Opdenakker, 2006). However, for efficiency the interviews were conducted via phone. Follow-up interview questions pertinent to individual responses occurred via phone. When clarification was needed, I asked participants to elaborate and share anything else I needed to know (Perjessy, 2013).

As a phone interview was not in-person, it was essential I created ambience between myself and the participant (Smith et al., 2009; Opdenakker, 2006). In-person interviews allow for verbal and nonverbal cues to be observed by the researcher, generating more in-depth data (Opdenakker, 2006). Cues could be missed in a phone interview format and therefore open communication was vital to ensure the accuracy of data. For example, I asked the participant to clarify if their voice became too quiet to decipher as visual cues such as reading their lips was not an option to support understanding of their responses. Follow-up questions pertinent to individual responses occurred when clarification was needed. I also asked participants to elaborate and share anything else I need to know (Perjessy, 2013).

Data Analysis Plan

By conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) I intended to develop a greater understanding of the military student experience in CES programs, so academic institutions can cater their programming to make this career path more accessible to this population. Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) refer to IPA as a qualitative methodology that aligns with this research approach because it explores both the lived experience and the institutional perspective of the phenomena and identify similarities and differences between the two (Smith, 2011).

Data gathering involved audio recordings of semistructured, in-depth interviews that were later be transcribed manually by the researcher for accuracy. The data was transcribed verbatim by me without the use of a transcription company. To ensure the research is trustworthy, I had scholastic peers ensure my themes captured the data accurately by having scholastic peers review the transcription and audio recordings. To align with an IPA approach, I probed participants as needed during the interviews to verify responses and developed an understanding of the source of the information shared (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). According to Smith et al. (2009), by systematically verifying the semistructured interview responses in this way the qualitative analysis that occurred will support my interpretation of the responses. Once I exhausted all possible coding, and further interviews were no longer feasible due to an absence of new information data saturation occurred (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

I conducted semistructured interviews versus focus groups due to the access to the data. Focus group data collection can be viewed as temporary because the group convening at the same time, place, and in the same environment may not be possible due to environmental facts influencing events and this can detract from the depth of accessible information (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Due to the temporary nature of focus groups, mistrust can also contaminate the process. This can occur when a participant's personal interests lead them to avoid telling the truth or they withhold relevant information to save face (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

The research process involved the following steps to ensure a consistent methodical approach to data analysis: I listened to the audio recordings and reviewed transcriptions and journal notes repeatedly to (a) identify units and prominent themes. (b) identify themes that connect prevalent topics, (c) review themes for patterns and, (d) repeating the process until no further units, themes, or patterns are identified (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). I conducted member checking to make the study trustworthy (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Member checking occurred when I sent a preliminary summary of the main findings to reviewers and participants to confirm the transcript was understandable and acceptable and reflected accurate information. According to van Manen (2016), identifying patterns and repetitive statements will shape the coding process. By highlighting themes and circling sub-themes of data. I combined the findings in an excel spreadsheet. The themes and sub-themes were categorized in alphabetical order to make categorizing the data efficient. This process enabled me to delve deeper into the content of the transcripts and determine common factors with all participants (Van Manen, 2016). By repeatedly reviewing the transcripts and looking for themes, and subsequently be closer to the data. I manually coded the data rather than utilizing qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, because the manual process I believe allowed me to become more familiar with participant responses (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). I developed an ongoing understanding and interpretation of the data by asking questions such as does the story show experience? Does it engage? (Crowther, Ironside, Spence, & Smythe, 2017). I reflected on the data analysis process throughout each stage, by continuing to log reflections in a journal.

Verification of Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are components of research trustworthiness according to Lincoln and Guba (1985). In qualitative research these mechanisms superseded that of reliability and credibility to assess the quality of the research (Kline, 2008). I will now explain how this research can be seen to meet these criteria.

Credibility

Credibility focuses on the desire to make the research believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB to conduct the research. A quality research study is transparent and clear in how the research process occurs. This began with being transparent in the IRB application process about the intentions and approach of the research. IRB approval acknowledges a level of trustworthiness has been demonstrated in the research. In qualitative research, patterns indicate more predictable and trustworthy evidence (Saldaña, 2016). Credibility was also established through member checks after the interviews occurred to verify the meaning of units and themes and cross referenced with quotes to determine if data analysis was congruent with transcriptions. During the data analysis stage of the research, literature triangulation served to verify if emergent themes compared or conflicted with existing research findings. Trustworthiness was evident as patterns in research findings were identified. Trustworthy evidence makes the research findings more credible and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

To determine if the research was dependable, a researcher must show that the research when placed under scrutiny will show the same results. To accomplish this, I identified a scholarly peer to conduct an independent review of the research. By introducing an unbiased third party to conduct a complete review of the data collection and analysis process dependability was verified. This approach further enabled the researcher to establish accurate interpretation of findings and establish trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability (Patterson & Williams, 2004; Smith, 2011). By providing clarity the study is replicable and can be repeated in different locations or with different populations to measure the same phenomenon. Dependability in the data collection can be found in that one researcher completed the process making the process consistent. In contrast, a limitation of this research is that only one researcher transcribed the data and therefore the data findings may be subject to the bias or prejudice of the researcher during transcription. This was avoided by the committee chair reviewing data transcription.

Transferability and Confirmability

To make this research transferable, I approached the methodology with the rationale that the counseling profession and military will benefit from further research in this area. Therefore, I provided comprehensive detail about the sourcing of participants and the interview process. For the research to be transferable the methodology including timeline, research questions, transcriptions, and data analysis were documented. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested an external auditor establish dependability and confirmability. Therefore, I identified a scholastic peer in my doctoral cohort, not a Committee member, to review all aspects of the research from my data collection process, transcripts, data analysis, findings, and seminal literature to support the dependability and confirmability of this research. I also established confirmability by providing all participants with a transcript summary after the interviews so that participants could confirm the accuracy of the transcription and identified themes. By having the participants review the summaries and themes I could be sure they agree that the transcript interpretations reflected their experiences. By clearly defining the target population, providing an interview guide, and templates for communications with participants, it was my intention that this research will be transferable to other academic institutions offering an opportunity for counseling programs to develop increased understanding of military student populations and the obstacles they face in their journey to CES degree completion.

Summary

A detailed outline of the methodology of this study was given to support its future replication by other researchers attempting to develop an increased understanding of the counseling field. By outlining potential ethical concerns, this research hopes to prevent obstacles to the research process. The importance of providing a comprehensive rationale for the theoretical framework should not be understated. This approach provided a strong research foundation from which this research was based and ensured the quality of this study findings. The application of this approach and any deviations from the initial outline will now be discussed.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of military students on their journey to degree completion in a counselor education and supervision doctoral program. I used a phenomenological hermeneutic theoretical approach to understand the lived experiences of military students on their journey to degree completion in a counselor education doctoral program. I chose this approach because research literature creates a lens from which the researcher can view the lived experience of the participant. To develop the context and the deeper understanding Heidegger identified as crucial, I conducted 6 semistructured interviews on PhD students (Heidegger, 2011). After gathering the data, I applied the hermeneutic circle to develop understanding and apply the findings to the research questions. The primary research question is: What are the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion? An additional question to add a deeper understanding was: What personal characteristics positively contributed to academically successful military CES students?

Chapter 4 will present the data solicited from the 6 participants who met the eligibility criteria to participate in the study. I will initially present information about the setting, demographics, and data collection of this study. Next, I will describe the data analysis process, provide evidence of trustworthiness, and conclude with the results of the research.

Setting

Invitations to participate in the study were sent out beginning February 27, 2019 following IRB Approval on January 8, 2019 (IRB Approval #02-25-19-0544032, expiration 02/24/2020). Data collection began when I received responses to the invitations I submitted to: CESNET listserv and Walden's Participant Pool. Within 14 days, four individuals responded and after 21 days I verified all respondents met criteria to participate and all signed the Informed Consent Form and completed the Demographic Form. I interviewed six participants – five from the CESNET listserv and one from Walden's Participant Pool. I conducted all interviews over the phone for ease of access and the scheduling convenience of the participants. I was located in a private office and the interviewer verified that the participant was in a private setting prior to commencing the interview.

Demographics

To participate in this study, all participants signed an Informed Consent acknowledging the parameters of the research. In addition, all participants completed a Demographic Form and I verified prior to conducting the interviews that the participants' met the following criteria: (a) have a PhD in counselor education at a CACREP accredited school, or (b) are currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited PhD CES program, or (c) were enrolled in a CES doctoral program in the past 12 months; (d) have access a phone, the internet, and email; (e) can commit to a 60-90-minute interview at a time of your choosing; (f) are willing to provide follow-up information after the interview. Participants were geographically located throughout the United States in

Texas, Tennessee, Oregon, Virginia, and Kentucky. Participants were asked the following demographic information: name, year of birth, address, gender, if English was their first language, race, military service status (active, inactive, or reserves), student status (part-time or full-time), graduation date (or anticipated date).

Participant age ranged from 36-46 years and participant genders were three females and three males. Five participants confirmed English as their first language, with one participant indicating Greek was their first language. The race of participants included one African American, two White-Hispanic, and three White. There were two active duty participants and four inactive. Of the inactive participants, two were retired and all saw themselves as veterans. No participants identified as being enrolled in the Reserves. All students attended or graduated from a CACREP accredited CES PhD program, the geographic locations of which could be found across the United States. Participants introduced the possibility that despite being a CACREP program, some programs were better run than others, citing disorganization, as one reason programs differed in quality. One participant graduated in 2018, five have projected graduation dates of late 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023. All participants believed they would graduate by their projected graduation date (Figure 1.). Three participants identified as full-time students and two identified as part-time students, while one participant identified as neither because she had already graduated. I conducted all of the interviews between March 2nd, 2019 and March 22nd, 2019.

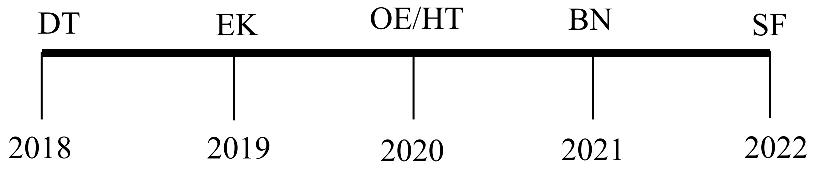

Figure 1. A visual representation of the participant's graduation dates.

Participant Profiles

Participants were randomly assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The profile of each participant is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Demographic Information

Participant Identifier	Participant Description
BN	This 43-year-old White-Hispanic female is attending a CACREP accredited program and she plans to graduate in summer 2021. She identifies as a military veteran and is currently enrolled as a part-time student.
DT	This 43-year-old, White female graduated from a CACREP accredited program and is no longer a student. She identifies as a military veteran.
EK	This 36-year-old White male is attending a CACREP accredited program and he plans to graduate in December 2019. He identifies as a military veteran and is currently enrolled as a full-time student.

(table continues)

Participant Identifier	Participant Description
HT	This 38-year-old White-Hispanic male is attending a CACREP accredited program and he plans to graduate in December 2020. He identifies as a military veteran and is currently enrolled as a full-time student.
OE	This 37-year-old African American female is attending a CACREP accredited program and she plans to graduate in May 2020. She identifies as a military veteran and is currently enrolled as a part-time student.
SF	This 46-year old White male is attending a CACREP accredited program and he plans to graduate in May 2022. He identifies as active duty military and is currently enrolled as a full-time student.

Data Collection

An interview protocol was adopted to elicit rich data from participants (Appendix A). All of the interviews were conducted by telephone. I recorded these phone calls with the Application Auto Call Recorder For iPhone. The interviews lasted from 30-60 minutes, with the first interview taking the longest, which could be attributed to my familiarity with the questions, making the process more efficient the more interviews I conducted. I transcribed the interviews within five business days of conducting the interview. I entered a reflective journal log once the transcription was complete and uploaded the files to iCloud with password protection.

I submitted the resource flyer and the transcribed interview to each participant requesting feedback and verification of accuracy. I also emailed or mailed 100% of participants their chosen gift certificate within 3 business days of the interview. I emailed my committee chair an excel spreadsheet including themes, subthemes, and quotes by March 25, 2019 and requested verification of my interpretation of the data and confirmation of transcription accuracy. This member checking process occurred within seven business days of all participants being in receipt of their transcript. I completed all seven interviews within four weeks, with the first interview occurring on March 2nd, 2019 and the last March 22nd, 2019. The entire data collection process from initial invitation email to final confirmation of transcript accuracy took four weeks.

Data Analysis

In order for data analysis to occur, all of the interviews were accurately transcribed. To ensure the dependability of this process, I engaged in member checking. Data analysis took the form of a cyclical process whereby the transcripts were read and reread to identify common themes and patterns. This hermeneutic approach allows for themes to be identified if not in the initial cycle of review, in later cycles demonstrating an in-depth analysis of the data has occurred (Lichtman, 2012). By identifying emerging themes and then reviewing the data to determine if more themes emerge, the approach was reflective of the hermeneutic circle, a process coined by Heidegger (Heidegger, 1977). Incorporated into the hermeneutic circle process was not only transcription analysis, which sought to identify unique patterns and themes, but the interviews were also considered as a whole so as to consider both part of the interview as well as the whole interview, the individuals, as well as the group.

After reading the transcripts for the first time, I began coding and introducing notes to support my rationale for coding decisions. After rereading the transcripts multiple times, I completed the initial identification of patterns and themes. Rereading the transcripts multiple times led to the development of emergent themes. Increasing numbers of patterns and themes were found until saturation took place. I created a table in a Microsoft Word document with columns signifying the main literature headers of Chapter 2. These columns served as a means to code my level one themes. I then searched for a connection across emergent themes and any connections across participant responses. Emergent themes (level 2) were then identified by subheadings in each column. I included any ideas, quotes, or concepts (level 3) under each subheading. To assist in identifying themes, I used (CTRL-F) within the document to quickly identify themes and sections of the transcript and coding document. I applied lean coding to avoid large numbers of codes during the data gathering and analysis process (Creswell, 2017).

Results

This research was focused on answering the research question “What are the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion?” An additional question to add a deeper understanding included, “What personal characteristics positively contributed to academically successful military CES students?” These questions centered on the experience of military PhD CES students and graduates and their experiences to aid in the future expansion of PhD CES programs to this population.

The Primary Question

The primary question was to explore the lived experiences of military CES students related to their journey towards degree completion. Several themes and patterns were identified during the data analysis process which can be viewed in Figure 2.

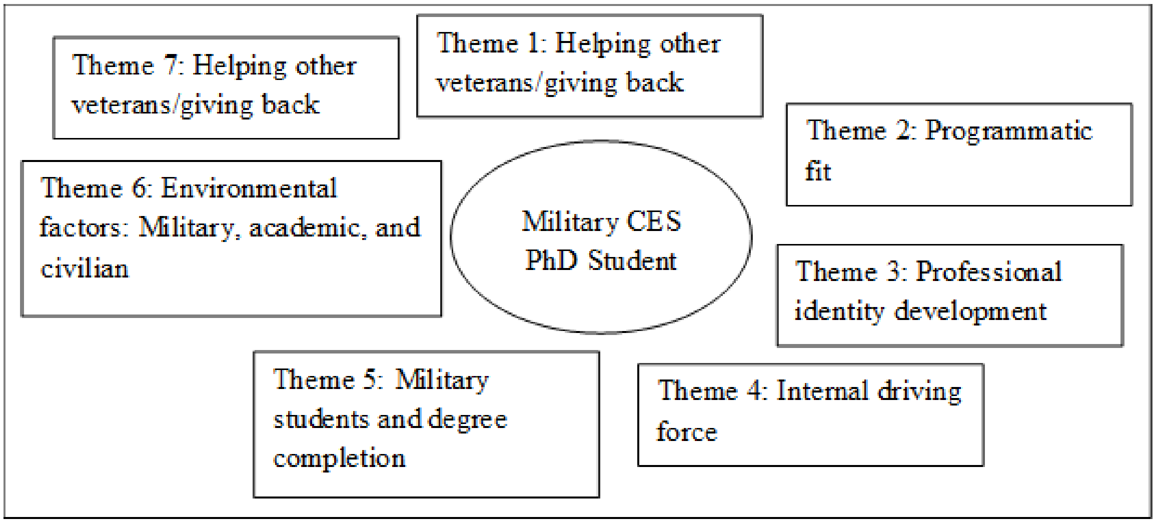
Theme 7: Helping other veterans/giving back
Theme 1: Helping other veterans/giving back
Theme 2: Programmatic fit
Theme 6: Environmental factors: Military, academic, and civilian
Military CES PhD Student
Theme 3: Professional identity development
Theme 5: Military students and degree completion
Theme 4: Internal driving force

Figure 2. A visual representation of emergent themes for military PhD CES students.

CES PhD military students are individuals who initially may not have been sure of their career choice. Like many civilians in high school, they were uncertain of the career path to choose but ultimately, they selected the military and dedicated years of their lives to the service of our country. To this end, it is incumbent upon us to identify characteristics about this population who have unique and valuable experiences which can translate into competency in the counseling field. For example, the demands of the military whether frequent travel, deployments, time management, job responsibilities, or leadership has shaped their character and propelled them into the person they are today. As a result, they have developed insight about who they are as individuals and what they have to offer which can be beneficial in a counseling setting and set them apart from their civilian counterparts.

Military students seek to learn and share their knowledge as part of their CES PhD experience, yet they often face obstacles in doing so. The desire for the military student to share, is hampered by an uncertainty of whether the information will be received in the way it is intended, or if students, lacking life/military experience will truly appreciate where they are coming from. Not only does this detract from their willingness to share, but it also can detract from the opportunity of civilian students to learn. Many frustrations born out of a lack of cultural awareness were seen. Military students also see themselves as having significantly more experience than their peers in specific areas, for example leadership, and on these occasions the question of whether to shine or hold back can be a challenge.

To support military students in their pursuit of a CES PhD, relationships with peers, cohorts, faculty, and family were identified as important. These relationships were seen as significant at all stages of their decision-making process to enter into the program and remain in the program as they faced challenges to their professional and personal identity. The ability to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and research options helped them navigate their career choices and ultimately their decision to move into the counseling profession. Yet, this was not clear for any of them at the beginning of their career and continues to be an issue due to the lack of recognition the military affords the counseling profession.

Military students in pursuit of a CES PhD recognize that the career opportunities accessible to them in the military are not as robust as for other professions. For example, if they chose to pursue a social work PhD, they would have access to more federal employment opportunities than CES PhD graduates. For many that is okay, they have already served and at this time in their career they choose to *give back* in other ways. Yet, for others who are currently active duty the decision to pursue a CES PhD can be detrimental to their career and lead to financial consequences as well as a lack of promotional opportunities in the future. Choosing a CES PhD can be seen as a 'betrayal' of your career path within the military, which is the kind of stigma the counseling profession should seek to avoid.

Barriers to degree completion begin with a lack of access to the counseling career path at the initial stages of a military service members career. Yet, culminate in a military student's lack of financial aid to support education at the PhD level. Financial programs assisting military personnel exist and have been utilized by many, despite the apparent underutilization of benefits available. Yet, participants in CES PhD programs report a lack of competence and financial support from the VA when it comes to counselor education and attribute this to a lack of alignment with military career paths. One participant went so far as to say,

> you can serve the military if you like, however, you cannot do it as an LPC because there is no military occupational specialty for a licensed professional

> counselor or a licensed marriage and family therapist. If you want to serve in the military then you have to be either a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker. If you want to serve the military you can but you will do so for the Army, or Navy, or the Air Forces, eh whim. So, if you want to enlist or commission you can do that, but they are going to put you where they want you [in a previously established occupational specialty such as psychiatry, psychology, or social work]. (SF Transcript)

This implies the military just does not see the value in creating an occupational specialty for counselors despite the glaringly need. Alternatively, it could also imply the military does not support academic pursuits in the counseling field at this level.

Despite obstacles and daily challenges that impact their ability to complete the CES PhD, military students profess their military experiences place them in a unique position to assist fellow service members. This research uncovered a desire to aid people with their mental health needs, support the development of civilian counselor military competence, and find fulfilment in their future career as a counselor educator that propels the student toward graduation.

Supporting Question

To provide additional understanding I asked the question: What personal characteristics positively contributed to academically successful military CES students? The findings of this research indicate CES PhD military students are driven to complete their doctoral degree by internal traits that dominate their rationale and propel them toward graduation. These innate traits are reflected throughout their military career and appear to align them in their desire to give back to their communities. These traits include being driven, focused, hard-working, single-minded, stubborn, goal-seeking, and a desire to excel. One-way CES PhD military students give back, is to support the military that clearly shaped their early careers. They accomplish this in a variety of ways, all of which are opportunities they identified as being accessible upon completion of the CES PhD. For example, teaching in higher education, opening a private practice, or conducting research in the counseling field.

Theme Analysis

After analysis of the transcript during the IPA process, the following themes were identified:

Theme 1: Helping Other Veterans/Giving Back

A determining factor for all participants in selecting to complete a CES PhD was their desire to work in a helping profession and give back. To accomplish this goal, they aligned the CES PhD with their experiences within the military and found the best way to give back was to pursue a career in the counseling profession whether this was in the form of teaching future counselors, or providing counseling services to veterans themselves, the means to achieve this objective was the same. DT said, “a lot of military, former military that seek out careers in counseling or psychology, really want to help their fellow veterans” (DT Transcript). The CES PhD was identified by participants as a means for them to give back. All participants indicated the CES PhD program created options for them upon graduation in the way they gave back. Reflective of Callahan and Jarrat’s (2014) focus to help student service members and veterans succeed, participants sought to help other veterans and give back to their communities. This is evidenced by SF, who stated, “I want to be able to reach out and give back [uh] and really shape the next generation of counselors, counseling students” (SF Transcript). DT said, “a lot of military, former military that seek out careers in counseling or psychology, [because they] really want to help their fellow veterans” (DT Transcript). SF supported this when he said, “the desire to really help the system, the larger system, better care for my brothers and sisters who’ve worn uniform, those uh, those things compel me to succeed as well” (SF Transcript). Participants also identified a desire to find flexibility in their career choices whilst at the same time, providing support and assistance to their communities. Participants expressed a desire to help other veterans and saw their military experience as a means to accomplish that task. OE said,

> I wanted to help other veterans, uh, and military personnel , just from a place of relatedness and being able to understand what they’ve been through and empathize with them. And specifically, counselor ed. Because I feel that more people from a diverse background need to be in counselor education and I’m also interested in research, so all of it culminated into joining a CES program. (OE Transcript)

As Cates, Zeller, and Faircloth, (2017) pointed out in their research on military personnel, in order to serve those who serve, it is important to understand military personnel and these responses assist in this endeavor. These responses led to the first subtheme of PhD rationale.

Subtheme: Continued Development

A desire to continue studying and identifiying as a life-long learner were reasons given to pursue a PhD. HT provided an example of this when he siad,

> I wanted to learn, uh, I feel like I'm a life-long learner type of thing, you know be, you know, this degree or learning how to play guitar, or you know learning how to weld or learning something about gardening, you know I just feel like I'm always reading something uh, in order to learn, and so that's one of the things I just feel like I'm always searching for, new information so that I can learn it. (HT Transcript)

DT reflected on her decision to select a CES program which included the career options it could lead to when she said,

> just making choices in terms of things to pursue and different areas to pursue and things to pursue in your personal life and professional and you know, being in a CES program if you're actually wanting to pursue a career as faculty uh, or as a supervisor even, there's a lot to being involved in the presenting, and research, and you will go to conferences. (DT Transcript)

EK shared how military opportunities and his desire to to have options later in his career shaped his rationale when he said,

> the challenge was, how do I relay my military skills to occupational skills. Uh, so at the time I had a bachelor's degree and I did…Troop to Teachers, I went into education because that's what was available. And then from there I knew I didn't just want to be a teacher, for the rest of my career so I started looking at avenues I

> could do outside of education so I went and uh pursued school counseling with the dual track for school counselor/ licensed professional counselor so I can work inside and outside the school system. (EK Transcript)

A pattern that evolved throughout the interviews related to the participants motivation for pursuing a PhD (Litalien et al., 2015). Individual rationale for selecting the CES and a desire for the majority of participants to pursue a teaching career were prevalent subthemes.

Subtheme: Teaching

Participants each gave their own rationale for selecting to pursue a CES PhD which varied, yet the majority of participants related their decision to a desire to teach. For example, BN said “I wanted to be a professor” (BN Transcript). DT said “I wanted to teach” (DT Transcript). SF said “I really want to teach the next generation of counselors” (SF Transcript). EK said “I really enjoyed teaching adults, I’ve actually taught adults when I was in the military” (EK Transcript). Additional reasons for pursuing the PhD were “I feel more people from a diverse background need to be in counselor education” (OE Transcript,) or simply to “just be happy with it [the program]” (HT Transcript).

These findings provide clear rationale for why military students chose to pursue a CES PhD. Unfortunately, Gardner’s (2009) belief that an absence of literature relating to doctoral students inhibits the higher education community from understanding and supporting their needs remains. For example, according to participants, academic institutions offering CES PhD programs are not represented at military career events.

Instead, there is an over representation of Fortune 500 companies and business-related offerings (OE Transcript).

DT said,

> I wanted to teach, uh, and also having the same ability, to have the ability to pursue other areas uh, in higher education, such as student affairs, or faculty, counseling centers, um, so yeah, that was that a part of why I chose this CES program. (DT Transcript)

If the majority of CES military students feel this way, then why are academic institutions not capitalizing on this opportunity? The military students interviewed for this study had a broad range of experiences pertaining to the reasons why they sought a CES PhD. Common factors that influenced their decision included professor/mentor encouragement to pursue a PhD. OE said, “a mentor asked, where do you want to be in 10 years and I said I want to be a counselor educator I want to be teaching, and they said well why not now?” (OE Transcript)

Having identified career goals, another decision the participants made was which program to attend. “Fit” became an important factor in this decision-making process.

Theme 2: Programmatic fit

The participants of this study eluded to the importance of finding a good ‘fit’ with their doctoral program which reflects the work of Bagaka et al. (2015), Gardner (2009), and Pyhältö and Keskinen (2012). Academic institutions offering a full-time or part-time education, online versus brick and mortar environment, or CACREP accreditation were key factors that helped all participants decide on which CES PhD program to attend. All participants believed they had made the right decision in terms of selecting the CES PhD and its “fit” with their academic goals. For example, HT believed that “Fit” with the program was the deciding factor as to whether he would pursue the CES PhD. Multiple participants mirrored this belief and referred to having choices about which PhD program to pursue.

When deciding about a CES program’s “fit” participants placed importance on the cultural feel of the academic institution they attended, specifically they identified with their faculty, and this shaped their interpretation of the academic institutions culture and whether the program would be right for them. When asked about faculty at the institution, DT felt there was a “match to her cultural feel, we all have our own things and pursue them” (DT Transcript).

HT said,

> I wanted to be comfortable with the program, uh, I wanted to go into a profession that was, that could manage stress, and that you know, and not bring that chaos, or manage chaos I guess, uh, in the daily operations, because for me, I mean coming from the military…it was rapid knee jerk you know, response type situations uh and uh, and so it was like you are always responding to things, and I told myself going, leaving that profession that I wanted to get me a job that like, I could just relax and manage things on my own terms, and you know, uh, just be happy with it, you know uh, knowing that I wasn’t gonna be stressed out. (HT Transcript)

So, to ensure he made a good decision about which career path to pursue, HT visited institutions and spoke to individuals in the CES program, sat in classes, and really immersed himself in the institutions culture to make sure it was the right choice. Ultimately, he felt he did feel he made the right choice. Yet his choice and the choice of other participants was not based on the university websites' which contrasts with Ihme et al., (2016) who made the observation that the website can support recruitment. Rather the choice was deciding on the type of program, hybrid, brick and mortar, or online rather than the representation of the program on the academic institution's website.

Subtheme: Hybrid model programs

Four participants identified a hybrid program model as more suitable for their academic needs. Baker and Moore (2015) emphasized the importance of students having access to the academic program and this reasoning featured in participant responses. DT said, "it [hybrid program] was a good program for working adults" (DT Transcript). SF reflected these sentiments yet went on to say" for me it's been a bit of a challenge, because I am still on active duty in the Army, my, the unit I'm in my boss still has expectations" (SF Transcript). So, despite the hybrid model offering opportunity for degree completion due to accessibility for military students, it also was a struggle to balance with active duty military demands. The reasons participants gave for preferring the hybrid model included "offering the ability to access classes…self-paced courses….and I didn't need face-to-face learning even though I enjoyed it [because] I am self-motivated" (EK Transcript). EK's remark were reflected by HT and SF who felt a more structured model was not needed due to their already established self-discipline, which they attributed to their time in the military. All participants including HT, EK, and SF reported time management challenges when faced with juggling school, work, and personal responsibilities regardless of program model and whether they were full-time or part-time.

Subtheme: Military student enrollment

Academic institutions should note, multiple participants identified their Masters' program as a pivotal time when they were introduced to the CES PhD.

DT said,

> when I graduated with my Master's in Counseling, I had a cohort who was in the process of applying for their doctorate. And uh, I didn't know too much about the CES program. I was mainly, I was interested in furthering my education, but I wasn't quite sure in what uh capacity … I saw especially with my cohort … I was leaning more towards the counseling psychology program. (DT Transcript)

More than half the participants had conversations with peers and faculty during their Masters' program that led to further research about CES PhD programs. Academic institutions have placed importance on enrolling military students according to participants. SF believed one of the only reasons he was admitted was because of his military status,

> I think one of the reasons I was admitted into the program is because of my military experience, or, so I've been told multiple times by the Director, they have never had a military member, [a military student] has never joined our student body in this way. (SF Transcript)

Despite efforts to enroll military personnel, academic institutions seem to be "hit and miss" when offering Veteran benefits to registered students. For example, three participants reported the Veterans Affairs representative on campus lacked competence in the services they should have been providing. SF reported:

> I've not received any or run across any barriers. [Except,] when the school, the Veteran Rep, is supposed to file your paperwork and get you money from the VA and all that kind of stuff, she's not the most competent, so I've had to ask some questions, and she's come back, *ok, well I don't know, I'll have to research that,* well that's your JOB, uh and she's told me at different points that I'm the one that needs to get in touch with the VA and I'm like, you're then one that's the school liaison! (SF Transcript)

Frustrations like this were linked to participant experiences with the VA. In alignment with Burkholder's (2012) findings on retention and attrition, and to acknowledge the work of Mittwede, Noch, and Guo (2014) who identified key factors that lead to attrition, it is important to understand military student characteristics that can support them along their academic journey to reduce such frustrations. Findings from this research show a sense of belonging and the interactions military students have with peers and faculty can influence whether they choose to pursue a CES PhD.

Another participant pointed out there was a waiting list for access to a CES program, which acted as a deterrent to enrollment. EK said,

> I teach counseling students and I went ahead and started looking at alternate counselor education programs to see what might work, I found a local one, but there was a waiting list, uh, and I did not want to wait a couple of years to get

> started at the time so I texted a university that was online and that's where I'm at right now. (EK Transcript)

Another factor that was identified as having a detrimental impact was the shift in cultural experiences. Although all participants recognized there would be a shift from military culture to academic culture, the significance of this shift was underestimated. EK frames this well by saying, "it can be quite shocking for some people, especially if you've been under a certain mindset for many years and it's very structured and some things are just, might be very obvious, and then working with some people it's not" (EK Transcript). Along with encouraging peers and cohorts to be open to military culture, military students must also be open to the new academic culture.

Subtheme: Work-life balance

Participants were faced with balancing work responsibilities, personal life and academic demands. For example, "It was just time consuming since I have been working full-time. (EK Transcript). DT said,

> it was quite challenging, I had, I was working fulltime while I was also a fulltime student, and I have a family and two young children, so there was a lot of uh, making choices, spending time with the family, or uh, making sure I finish an assignment… (DT Transcript)

This time management theme was referenced throughout all the interviews consistently impacting military students regardless of academic program or military experience. Participants stated their ability to serve the needs of the military, who SF referred to as a "jealous mistress", was challenging when it conflicted with needs of their CES PhD program (SF Transcript). In these situations, active duty military did not have an option, but to prioritize military service over school demands. Although these occasions were infrequent, participants of this study stated these events can result in stress and may create an opportunity for academic institutions to provide additional support for military students facing these challenges. SF remarked,

> my [military] boss is very supportive of me pursuing a PhD uh, I still have responsibilities right, so how I balance uh, going to UPT (Unit Physical Training) at 6:30 and show up for work by 9:00 and be there all day long and then come home, and you know you're married and then there's children. I have to balance those things those are the barriers. (SF Transcript)

Programs that included structured classes lead to stressors, and that stress could increase exponentially when combined with work and family demands. For example,

> when my children are playing sports, I have to say I'm sorry I can't be at your game tonight I have to be in class. Uh, or I'm sorry I can't come to your game on Friday or Saturday because I have to be on campus. (SF Transcript)

It could be argued that these stressors are similar for all PhD students. The difference lies in the inflexibility of military (employer) when it comes to balancing work, school, and home life. SF said,

> its been a challenge to balance, work, and family, and school. In the program particularly, I spent limited exposure to the professors that have had the classes last Fall and are teaching a class this semester and Spring so my exposure to the professors has been limited. (SF Transcript)

He implied that exposure to the professors would aid in his ability to learn from the professors during class, but because of time constraints due to work-family-school demands he was unable to take advantage of this opportunity unlike other students.

Theme 3: Professional identity development

This research identified the importance of networking and developing an identity on campus for military students. Half of the academic institutions identified in this study provided opportunities for professional identity development as part of the academic experience. For example, encouraging participants to teach, supervise, participate on committees to shape curriculum, or advance the field of counseling in some way. For example, SF said, “I’m volunteering, or not volunteering I’m student rep. on the curriculum committee which I figured would give me exposure to their thinking behind structuring the program and the CACREP influences in a program” (SF Transcript). Some of these programs or initiatives are woven into the CACREP (2016) syllabus, others are institution-led initiatives that can enhance the overall academic experience of the military student. Both avenues should be promoted for the overall benefit of military students embarking on such an academic experience to encourage a sense of belonging.

Several participants reflected the challenge they experienced with developing their professional identity during their program “there was a lot of times where I felt really challenged with finding my own identity” (DT Transcript). BN shared how she was “challenged with finding my own identity as a counselor educator or as a professional counselor” (BN Transcript) and how she was so confused with how to navigate this request in her academic journey seeking the support of faculty and peers to progress in this endeavor. Despite these struggles during the CES PhD program, upon analysis they did not present as an obstacle to degree completion.

What does support military students in their ability to complete the PhD is,

> I think the support that you get from cohorts, that's very important…two of my cohort we started the program together and we have been together supports throughout, we are like family…and my husband specifically he understands…and faculty of course, especially the faculty. (DT Transcript)

So, this research on military students aligns with the work of Perjessy (2013) on female students that found support networks during the academic experience significantly impact the student's ability to complete the CES PhD program. This research also identified an internal driving force that propelled them through any barriers toward graduation.

Theme 4: Internal Driving Force

A more prominent theme with participants was an internal desire to achieve the goal of a PhD which superseded other priorities. For example, DT said,

> I felt like I needed to go all the way so to speak, …I did very well with my Masters, and uh, I think it may have been uh, the way that I felt. Uh, being in the military also the Marine Corp, I , uh I wanted to excel, I wanted to uh, kinda further myself up the ranks and so I wanted to see if I could do that in the civilian world. And uh, getting a doctorate and sort of feeling. Part of it was, a big part of it was the way I felt about myself, I needed the confidence…it's just a very personal decision. To uh, to further my education to go with the doctorate just so that I could feel more accomplished, in my own [yep] abilities. (DT Transcript)

EK also said,

> I wanted to go all the way, I wanted to prove I could do it, I wanted to be recognized as a doctor. It's about wanting to do things, then I make my mind up and "not a lot can talk me out of it. (EK Transcript)

EK went on to say "[I] make it a priority and it's doable even with balancing family and work, and school…I'm the type, if I want to do something, I want to do something all the way" (EK Transcript) and "I've been trucking along and being persistent" (EK Transcript). The internal driving force to achieve a PhD was commonplace with all participants. Participants also identified barriers that consistently presented as obstacles to this goal.

> what has gotten me this far is all this stuff …figuratively and literally is the military context, uh the Army soldiers' creed, I will never quit. I will never accept defeat. So that is a positive side to that and there's a negative side to that, but I am quite driven. (SF Transcript)

Participants also aligned in their cultural similarities which propelled them to strive towards graduation. For example,

> I think it's the culture in the military, my family …and stuff and wanting to, with children set them up for success and demonstrate what hard work looks like. All of these things compel me to do it. (SF Transcript)

Not all participants responded by identifying strong character traits when considering their academic journey. Participants also identified negative experiences such as barriers and obstacles to degree completion which speaks to the focus of Hoskins and Goldberg's (2005) research.

Subtheme: Barriers to success

There were a variety of obstacles that participants have experienced on their journey to degree completion. DT said,

> I think from the aspect of time management, uh that…may have been a barrier for me…just making choices in terms of things to pursue …and you know being in a CES program and if you're actually wanting to pursue a career as faculty uh, or as a supervisor even, there's a lot to being involved in the presenting, and research. (DT Transcript)

DT also identified personal barriers, "I don't think it was anything in terms of the program itself, it was more sort of to come to terms with my…own abilities" (DT Transcript). A lack of familiarity with academic tasks such as research and writing were initial obstacles that diminished the further along in the program the student progressed. In addition, the approach to PhD learning was noted by several participants to contrast significantly with military educational approaches. For example, in the military concrete, structured learning is prevalent whereas at the PhD level abstract conceptual learning is incorporated into your academic journey. Several of the participants cited this transition was challenging for them and required the support of faculty and peers to help them understand why this approach was different and how it could benefit them.

This influencing factor, along with an internal motivation to succeed academically at the PhD level were prevalent characteristics with all participants. DT summed this up well when she said,

> I think it may have been uh the way that I felt, being in the military also the Marine Corp., I wanted to excel, I wanted to uh kinda further myself up the ranks, and so I wanted to see if I could do that in the civilian world. And getting a doctorate and sort of feeling part of it. (DT Transcript)

Participant's reported facing barriers and struggles as they embarked on the CES PhD program. DT said, "I think from the aspect of time management uh, being your own worst enemy, uh that…may have been a barrier for me" (DT Transcript). HT said, "I would see it more as a challenge, uh is just navigating the academic life and the personal life" (HT Transcript). SF agreed when he stated, "you're married and then there's children, I have to balance those things, those are the barriers" (SF Transcript). In contrast EK said "not really, it was really pretty straight forward, I spent 10 years in the Army and then 10 years in adult education, I think I have a strength in both areas in understanding. I didn't really feel like I had any barriers, I've been trucking along and being persistent" (EK Transcript).

Despite barriers and struggles during their PhD experience, no participant mentioned pulling out of the program. This mindset was consistent for participants represented at all stages of the CES PhD journey from first year second semester to graduating within the past 12 months (Figure 1).

Subtheme: Transition

Burnett and Segoria (2009) spoke of the significance of the transition for military personnel from combat to college. This subtheme aligns with this transition for military personnel to the civilian world is a key opportunity for CES programs to promote their program. OE said

> when I came out of the military there were a lot of recruiters, but nothing for human services, or sciences we are always pushed, especially the officers, we're always pushed into corporate America, and to Fortune 500 companies, without knowing that, there is this whole other world out there. So, we just automatically assume that we are gonna go and be a business person because that's what we have always been taught but even though they are in the medical services and in the military, I don't think there is an awareness out there that there are Counselor Ed. Programs. You can be a counselor you can teach in Counselor Ed. versus Business. (OE Transcript)

Academic institutions should capitalize on this opportunity to source military personnel who have the potential to positively impact the counseling profession and serve military clients. It seems academic institutions are identifying the benefits of enrolling military personnel. For example, SF said "I think one of the reasons I was admitted into the program is because of my military experience" (SF Transcript). Yet, based on the participant feedback from this study there is the opportunity for academic institutions to go a step further, not only advocating for CES programs on an individual level but promoting programs at military career fairs and making academic benefits more accessible.

All participants in this study were eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill and scholarships to offset academic fees identified by USDE (2016) in their statistics representing military service members and veterans enrolled in undergraduate and graduate education. Unfortunately, this research found military students face multiple obstacles to receiving this aid, one example of this was provided by SF who stated, “she’s not the most competent” (SF Transcript) when referring to the VA rep he has had to deal with at his institution. Participants also notes military financial aid such as the post GI Bill has limitations which prevent full reimbursement at PhD level education. Participant responses highlighted the vast disparity between counseling student experiences with the VA compared to students participating in psychology and social work programs. Participants indicated that because counseling has no identified career path in the military compared to psychology and social work, they experience the offshoot of this disparity in the VA’s lack of competence in addressing their financial needs. EK suggested many potential CES PhD students fail to take advantage of the financial benefits that are available to them which could be another reason why military students do not pursue a CES PhD.

Two participants indicated they were veterans with disabilities who have access to additional benefits. However, these participants faced a double-edged sword where they benefitted from receiving additional financial aid but faced the additional challenge of having to overcome their disability during their academic experience which frequently could lead to barriers to success that other students in the program simply didn't face. On these occasions, one participant emphasized the importance of CES faculty being aware and appropriately responding to the disabled military veterans need, to ensure continued success for the student in the program:

> I shared with uh, my advisor, most recently that some of my service-connected disabilities sometimes will affect my work, you know, but I've never shared that with anyone else. And I think it's just helpful…just having them say, *it's OK to tell us, this is not a good day*, uh, has been really helpful, and just having that support from faculty, but also from the school as well, to actually understand what service disability is, and how that can affect our education, has been, I can't even put it in words, it's been really great, uh, to have that platform [to] actually express what is going on when it is happening. (OE Transcript)

Military students who seek a doctoral degree must also navigate when to pursue a doctoral degree, whether during active duty or as a veteran/retired service member. The results of this research indicated participants primarily relied on personal research to make their decision along with feedback from their personal network. A participant recommended "find your peer support group" when asked what advice they would give other students considering the CES PhD. All participants referenced research and dialogue with institutions, faculty, and students as influential factors in their decision to pursue a CES PhD.

Family and a sense of duty, financial security, and personality traits such as refusing to quit or wanting to succeed were identified as factors that influenced participants during their transition. BN said, “have some goals, you know have some goals [and go] as far as what you want to achieve” (BN Transcript). Ultimately, this mindset was prevalent in all participants seeking to complete their PhD.

Theme 5: Military students and degree completion

This research supports the research of Perjessy (2013), who focused on the journey of women towards CES degree completion. This research was able to identify common themes among military students in their journey to degree completion. All participants noted the significant challenges facing PhD level students. As an active duty military student facing this challenge, SF summed this up by saying, “the military is a jealous mistress, they will get the pound of flesh that they want…The military offers tremendous opportunity uh, but it comes at great, great, great cost” (SF Transcript). Yet, more than half of the participants indicated it was a “natural transition, from military life” (HT Transcript), citing the overlap of personal interests and experiences with counseling interventions as a motivating factor for pursuing a CES career. The majority of participants also identified the lifelong goal to pursue a PhD as motivation for their decision. Multiple participants also said they wanted to reach this academic goal. OE said, “to demonstrate competence in the form of license portability” (OE Transcript), and HT said, “give-back” to their brothers and sisters who are currently serving or serve and need mental health services.

Subtheme: Military culture

The participants of this research identified multiple areas where military culture impacted their CES PhD academic journey. Cole (2014) focused on school counselors and their ability to address military cultural needs. This research built on Cole's (2014) findings by identifying cultural factors that impact military student in their journey to degree completion. A prevalent theme focused on the ability for academic institutions to embrace military culture. For example,

> My advice to educators would be to uh, to broaden their knowledge, because I truly believe that growth happens on both ends of the spectrum and it's relational. So, educators can't expect the military person to all of a sudden change, or even military families all of a, suddenly change and not have that military demeanor, of what is perceived as a flat affect. It's not really a flat affect but for them to actually understand the culture of military. Uh, and what that looks like now…Uh, but really just educators being cognitive, and being aware that military students they're a culture of their own. It's a culture that you have to understand. (OE Transcript)

This example illustrates how military communication can be different, not just the spoken word, but the effect of military students, to communicate a message. It's important for faculty to be aware of this difference and understand where it's coming from. Similarly, all the participants referenced the concrete structured cultural framework of the military and how academic life differs. This transition was identified as one of the biggest challenges that participants faced when initially embarking on their CES PhD. Despite clear cultural challenges, OE also identified how military cultural experiences have aided her in her journey.

> I think that, of course I see things through a different lens. Uh, but also, when we are starting to talk about positionality and we are starting to talk about the multicultural frameworks, those that have the military experience really can understand the different cultures a little bit better…Uh you know, that you can just, drop a military person like, in the middle of it and that's the way I feel you can drop me in any situation and I'm like, oh ok, I can, I know how to engage with this uh client, or I know how to engage with this other student from a different background because that's what I've always had to do. And I don't know if it's more so from you know uh, war experience, or just deployments or just being moved, from one part of the country to the other but it's just become easier to become comfortable around others. (OE Transcript)

So, for OE, military culture posed very clear benefits in her ability to acculturate and feel competent in different environments, and challenges when the teaching modality shifted from structured to more fluid and conceptual in nature. BN referenced similar experiences, saying "it gave me a chance to you know, see the different cultures and experience the military life" (BN Transcript).

The participants also aligned in their belief that because of their military experiences they could add value to the CES PhD program for other students who lacked similar life experiences.

Subtheme: Career journey

The majority of participants experienced early on in their education, a lack of direction. The majority of participants did not know what they were going to do for their career, when they were in High School. The decision to join the military was different for each participant, with some seeking opportunities to travel, others looking for financial security, the opportunity to serve, and growing-up in a military family also impacted the decision. Despite these differing origins, all participants were united in their lack of awareness of CES career paths during high school. Unlike the work of Pyhältö and Keskinen (2012) who considered the doctoral journey of students and their supervisors' perceptions of their resources and challenges during that journey. This research focused on the self-identified journey and perceptions of the CES military student.

All participants discovered the counseling field and CES role later in their career. When asked what recommendations they would give military students, EG said "do a lot of homework around the kind of job" (EG Transcript). A barrier to CES PhD programs is that even if these participants did their homework, there would be no career track for counseling in the military. Rather, the established tracks of psychology and social work were accessible. HT reported he initially considered the counseling psychology career path,

> I wanted to go for a counseling PhD, uh, and or excuse me a counseling psychology program. Uh, and so I'd done all my research to kind of like prepare myself for that and so, was doing all that under you know the psychology field. (HT Transcript)

It wasn't until he spoke with a CES faculty member that his career choice changed,

> I talked with my faculty members, [about the CES program] and I just had an opportunity to evaluate it, and said OK from a counselor education's

> perspective…I think the light went on, and that is when I was like, that is what I want to do. (HT Transcript)

Academic institutions have an opportunity to attract students searching for a second career later in life. This funnel of students is already being accessed by social work and psychology professions who offer young people entering the military the possibility of pursuing a career within the military and beyond retirement. These professions plant the seed of opportunity early and are able to retain these individuals throughout their career securing the professions ongoing support. To overcome this barrier, participants noted counseling would need to be accessible as a recognized career path within the military from the start of their career. Ultimately, by addressing this barrier, military mental healthcare becomes more accessible to all.

Participants have found their CES PhD journey has been a journey of self-discovery. Ultimately, the participants reported their identities have evolved personally and professionally as a result of the academic journey. BN sums this up well when she said the CES PhD experience has “shaped the way I felt about myself” (BN Transcript).

In addition, by choosing a military career path, their career and subsequent academic journey has been shaped. For example, when referring to other nonmilitary students and their increased anxiety when faced with challenges from the program, OE observed that she is able to manage these challenges much more effectively stating, “it’s just certain things just aren’t that serious. So, I think it’s just a cultural change [that I can manage the challenges better than they can]” (OE Transcript). Ultimately, identities were shaped as a by-product of the career journey which was also influenced by environmental factors.

Theme 6: Environmental Factors: Military, academic, and civilian

Participants aligned in their belief that awareness of military culture could assist cohorts and peers in providing CES services to communities. Participants indicated they were at the stage in their life where they had insight into their strengths and how they wanted to contribute to their communities. For example, SF said

> the desire to get a counselor ed. and supervision PhD and teach wasn't simply about training counselors but getting them a military a particular military multicultural perspective, uh, because the reality is, it doesn't matter where you are, if you are in a big city if you are in a rural environment, if you are in a military family clinic, or a community health center or private practice you are gonna have a military population, veteran population [right] at some point. (SF Transcript)

So, whether in a civilian, military, or academic setting, the likelihood that counselor educators will face the military as peers, clients, or neighbors is likely. When comparing counseling and social work programs, it is clear that none of the participants attended a program that embraced military culture to the extent DuMars et al. (2015) demonstrated social work programs have. According to participants, institutional initiatives to embrace military culture and learning about military topics remains limited.

Subtheme: Perceived legitimacy of CES programs

This research discovered the disparity in counseling supervision hours between the psychology and counseling profession is overlooked, particularly by psychologists. EK highlighted this issue when he said,

> with our full Masters, doctoral hours, and my 3000 for LPC I was actually struggling with a few friends I know who are pursuing their doctorate in counseling psychology because I have far more hours logged. And, it is what it is. But uh, my attitude to that is that it's a sense of pride. (EK Transcript)

EK claimed it as a source of pride, yet, it begs the question, why should CES PhD students go through all of this education and supervision if professional opportunities are not accessible to them in the way they are to social work and psychology professionals. Participants identified the barriers military students could face. DT said,

> a lot of military, former military that seek out careers in counseling or psychology, really want to help their fellow veterans, [cough] and uh, I think that you really have to know, what you're willing, you're wanting, because uh, with a PhD in counselor education and supervision, you may have more problems getting jobs with the VA with that. Than say, a PhD in Psychology. So uh, you know I think that I would definitely be up front and honest about this, maybe the limitations of the program, itself if it's something that, uh depending on what the individual is really looking for. If they really want to teach and they uh really want to focus on the military supervision then, I really feel like the supervision program is up and coming and obviously there are a lot of great programs around

> the country. I think it's a great program to be in to further your education as counselors. (DT Transcript)

So, it seems despite wanting to offer mental healthcare to military personnel the military itself poses one of the biggest barriers, due to the inaccessibility of counseling career paths and lack of recognition counseling professionals receive in terms of competency. This is not only an obstacle created by the military on the outside looking in. Several participants in this study seemed to perpetuate the belief that if you weren't in the military you can't provide effective services. SF said, "not too many folks, have an understanding of what military families, military service members face" (SF Transcript). SF was implying that without such understanding counseling competency is lacking.

Another legitimacy issue is the understanding of counselor competency. EG said "doctors are more attractive to private clients" (EG Transcript). EG implied that prior to receiving the title doctor whether PsyD, PhD, or MD, clients were less likely to trust the expertise of the provider and therefore students who pursued licensure but stopped their academic pursuits post masters were not as likely to attract military clientele thus a barrier is formed. Waitzkin et al. (2018) indicated that military personnel who seek services outside of military providers for reasons of confidentiality and privacy want to trust in the quality of the services they receive. Participants in this study went one step further by indicating the level of their education was also a factor in whether or not services would be sought.

OE identified a CES legitimacy issue as the VA's lack of familiarity with the counseling career path. "I would say the only boundary uh, is that really the VA understanding how the program, and actually understanding the reasoning for seeking such a degree" (OE Transcript). OE's experience indicated peers seeking a psychology or social work career path had no issue finding VA support including financial assistance whereas the counseling CES career path involved lengthy explanations, referrals, transferred calls, and dead-end inquiries before any support was provided and even then, it was limited.

Military students pursuing a CES PhD could face career consequences if they endeavor to select a CES program. SF believes CES PhD programs should be advocated for and remarked his choice to pursue a CES PhD essentially voted him off the island because,

> I refused to develop a level of education and go on to do that program, so I'm probably not going to get promoted, I would be a shoe in with my uh, licensure and certifications as a director of one of the Family Life programs in Fort Bragg, but they don't value, …a PhD in counseling partly because they see it as a betrayal of your [career path] identity. (SF Transcript)

This challenge to the legitimacy of pursuing a CES PhD is detrimental to the future expansion of counseling professionals with military competency.

Subtheme: Advocacy of military culture in CES programs

All participants agreed that advocacy of military culture was essential if military personnel are to benefit in an academic setting. SF said,

> I'll absolutely advocate for opening up a pipeline to have LPC's and LMFT's in uniform and then at some point funding PhD's and counselor education, or ….I

> think it will be of benefit to the whole system, uh, to have more folks who are trained and adequately geared to help the military population. (SF Transcript)

BN explained that her military experience has helped her provide educational opportunities within her CES program and also in her role as a counselor educator when she advocates for clients who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).

> Sometimes it helps, it helped the Masters student last time, when she got emotional, you know, she actually saw my star [military award], and…I was helping her I guess…having you know, been in the military I see from a different angle, a different lens, so that's why I wonna you know help veterans with MST and how they find courage in deployment because they don't have a voice and so with this new "Me Too" movement I'm hoping I can get it pushed through. BN Transcript)

DT referred to academic institutions embracing military financial benefits to create access to CES programs for students. Advocacy of military culture in this way supports the military student's ability to complete a CES PhD by receiving financial support owed to them without facing financial obstacles that prevent graduation. For example,

> I think tailoring to the military student is important. And eh, accepting all the [financial] benefits. I think that's a big part of why I think a lot of veterans lean towards certain programs more than others, or certain schools in general. (DT Transcript)

SF agreed saying "It would be amazing if the Army would fund a PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision" (SF Transcript). DT went on to emphasize "it's the cultural sell that exists in that school, so, encouraging, motivating, [advocating for] all the military or veteran students to feel or attract them to [the school]. There is the cultural barrier [or lack of] support for them. So, I think that might be, that might be a way to attract them. I think that is what would be most important" (DT Transcript).

Alternatively, HT identified how advocacy of military culture should occur within the classroom to avoid creating barriers to degree completion. For example, he shared how the military shaped his writing and how this was a shift from military to academic culture when he began the CES program.

> In my previous career, uh, I thought I knew how to write, I was writing policies you know to give to my bosses, you know I was an enlisted guy, in charge of a department, uh I thought I knew how to do these things but then I got to this field and it was just like, no, there is just, nothing like this pertains, you know, and like this is a different type of writing. (HT Transcript)
>
> HT identified how advocating for military culture in CES programs could aid in reducing this educational gap and assist military students in their journey to degree completion. HT also shared an example of how faculty in a CES program could support military students,
>
> faculty support comes in the form of active support you know. *Hey, I noticed you are having a rough time*, you know, *what d'ya need*, and then there's the passive support which is *I'm not going to interfere until you ask* type of thing. We'll let you, you know, experience this a little bit on your own so you can figure

> it out and when you get stuck come hit us up, you know what I mean. (HT Transcript)

HT suggested two ways academic institutions can advocate for military culture, “be prepared for a different type of interaction” (HT Transcript) when engaging with undergraduate students familiar with a concrete application to learning, understand “the way that we learn and teach …is completely different to the way the academics, civilian academic institutions do this” (HT Transcript). And second consider,

> the writing aspect, uh, in the military we don’t give our service members an opportunity to write. There is really not a reason to write unless it’s some kinda like after action review…But even then it’s really bulleted, and I don’t even know if that’s a term, but it’s bulleted in its feedback, and so you’re not looking for big you know paragraphs of stuff, it’s just you know, give me your thoughts, and you just boom get a one liner. Uh, colleges are completely different, they are expecting you to write papers and that can be frustrating. (HT Transcript)

Academic institutions have an opportunity to advocate for military students by acknowledging these unique differences and identifying ways in which to bridge these cultural gaps. Hall et al. (2018) suggested using Relational-Cultural Theory to support a therapeutic alliance when working with military clients as a civilian therapist. The findings of this research would suggest this approach may also be plausible for CES faculty when engaging with military students in a supervisory capacity to bridge the cultural gap they experience.

HT framed this well when he said, “I think what it is, is I think veterans or service members who have gotten out, uh, see themselves as different. They know they’re different because they’re coming from one cultural setting to another cultural setting” (HT Transcript). So, in order to bridge this cultural gap, academic institutions can advocate for increased understanding of this gap, what it means, and how to bridge it to ensure the future of the counseling profession in a military setting.

Theme 7: Access to military counselors

Participants identify with a military culture and introduce this culture to the CES PhD program thus creating an alignment between the two. Indicating the more CES PhD programs enroll military students, the more aligned with military culture the programs will become. This premise is based on the theory that CACREP accredited CES programs all promote the value of sharing experiences to enhance the overall learning environment.

SF made the additional observation that CES graduates “no matter where you are, you are going to have access to a military population, veteran population at some point” (SF Transcript) which was supported by several participants. These combined factors suggest that academic institutions should address counselor and client needs in this setting, although the findings of this research did not expand on how this could be done it is certainly an opportunity for future study.

Participants were attuned to the fact there is no crystal ball to show how the counseling profession will evolve. EK pointed out “the challenge is just seeing as time progresses regardless of background, what the future of counseling is going to look like” (EK Transcript). OE went a step further when she said,

> This is more so thinking for the future. How do we get more counselor educators that have more military experience? Or, how do we uh, [pause] push military people to go into doctoral programs? Because I mean a lot of times people will stop because they think that's enough. But you know what, what is different about the military student that some will go, and some won't go that far? (OE Transcript)

Participants in this research mirrored the belief of Carrola and Corbin-Burdick (2015), Hall (2016), and Hall et al. (2018) that competency in working with military populations is important. Owens et al. (2009) reported a lack of competency in this area can lead to negative experiences for both the counselor and military client. The remarks below illustrate this.

> I've got [counselor] friends who are civilians, who have had military folks come in because they worked with military, and …they didn't understand the military culture and the military folks said, *screw you I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna talk to you*. And uh, of course the military folks said it more tersely than that. Uh, so how this works in a multicultural fashion, is understand the military community, so that when that… soldier or that veteran or that family member walks in and says, *hey, my husband has eight deployments, my wife has three deployment's, and this is where we are.* Uh, the individual doesn't fall out of their chair, [right] in shock. (SF Transcript)

Participants were united in their belief that they can competently assist military service men and women in this type of scenario because of their military experiences.

SF framed this by saying, “training counselors to do effective work, [yep] also training counselors who are uh, if you want to use the phrase, multi-culturally active, [yeah] to be a better population, that’s the passion” (SF Transcript). SF was promoting the belief that counselors should be effective in their therapeutic practices and also emphasizing how multicultural competency plays a role in this effectiveness. BN said,

> I have my military career and I’m already working as a clinician, and I kinda have that… you know, a way different perspective, like for instance, I’m getting ready to do my last residency and I’m taking my service star with me and so they’re already, you know they are already aware. And sometimes it helps. (BN Transcript)

Summary

PhD CES military students tend to believe as a result of their military experience they are qualified to address military service member mental health needs. The participants of this study have shown that they possess a strong drive to succeed. Participants had many similarities which became apparent in their responses but so are their differences.

While some participants experienced barriers in their academic journey, others denied facing obstacles, instead suggesting that whatever struggles they faced were ‘just part of the process. Barriers to degree completion were identified as differences in military and academic culture, financial aid, and a lack of military access to counseling as a profession. In Chapter 4 I presented the findings of this research. I also shared limitations of the study. I will now make recommendations supported by the research findings and also highlight implications for future research in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Interpretation of Findings, Recommendations, and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of military students on their journey to degree completion. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted due to the interpretive focus of this study and how they lived experiences were interpreted. Current literature created a foundation for this study and supported the rationale for pursuit of understanding that focuses on military students. To determine what barriers to degree completion exist for military CES students, I interviewed six who met the following eligibility criteria: (a) have a PhD in counselor education at a CACREP accredited school, or (b) are currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited PhD CES program, or (c) were enrolled in a CES doctoral program in the past 12 months; (d) have access a phone, the internet, and email; (e) can commit to a 60-90-minute interview at a time of your choosing; (f) are willing to provide follow-up information after the interview. A semistructured interview lasting 30-60 minutes was used to garner information from counselor education doctoral students and/or alumni about their lived experiences. All of the military students participating in the study provided comprehensive and detailed responses which served to increase our understanding of their lived experiences and benefit from that knowledge.

Prior researchers have explored the experiences of women (Perjessy (2013) striving towards a CES PhD, barriers to degree completion (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2014), and the need for competence in counseling military personnel (Clement et al., 2015; Sharp et al., 2015). Yet there remains a dearth of literature focusing on military students enrolled in CES programs to date which has served as one impetus for this research. This study was designed to address the lack of literature pertaining to military students in CES programs and share their experiences during the academic process and their life experiences to provide insight for academic institutions and the counseling profession as a whole regarding how to address military counseling needs in the future.

Key Findings

Following the semistructured interviews, the data analysis led to the discovery of seven key themes and eleven subthemes, a visual interpretation of these findings is shown in Table 2. A list of the themes and sub themes can be found in Appendix E.

Table 2

List of Military Counselor Educator Theme and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Helping other veterans/giving back	• Continued development • Teaching
Programmatic fit	• Hybrid model programs • Military student enrollment • Work-life balance
Professional identity development	
Internal driving force	• Barriers to success • Transition
Military students and degree completion	• Military culture • Career journey
Environmental factors: Military, academic, and civilian	• Perceived legitimacy of CES programs • Advocacy of military culture in CES programs.
Access to military counselors	

Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Helping other veterans/giving back. Military students entering into CES PhD programs identify with a sense of duty to their country and desire to give back to their communities when they embark on the program. All of the participants in this research identified a desire to give back with the most common approaches being focused on teaching and providing therapy to military service members.

***Subtheme 1: Continued development*.** Participants considered the CES PhD an opportunity to continue their education. To progress in their journey, whether professional or personal. They considered the CES PhD a means to realize their potential and utilize traits such as focus, determination, and desire to succeed as a means to accomplish this task.

Subtheme 2*: *Teaching. All of the participants who identified teaching as a means to give back, did so with a focus on teaching future counselors, and referenced how this could benefit the needs of the military. This builds upon the work of Brown and Gross (2011) who emphasized the importance of establishing best practices for students who sought to serve the military. According to my research findings, participants believed one way to develop this competency is by CES programs hiring faculty with military experience. In doing so, CES faculty can utilize their military experiences to create learning opportunities and best practices for students seeking to become competent when working with military clients.

Theme 2: Programmatic fit. All participants placed importance on identifying a CES program that would fit with their personal and professional needs. This dictated whether they choose a brick and mortar, online, or hybrid model program. The environment in the classroom and institution as a whole also impacted a participant’s decision to enroll and whether to remain in a program.

Subtheme: Hybrid model programs. The participants identified hybrid model programs as the programs that best meet their needs in terms of time management and the ability to juggle work-life challenges.

Subtheme: Military student enrollment. Participants conducted research about CES program prior to embarking on the PhD program. Enrollments were influenced by faculty, program structure, master’s degree peer experiences, and timing, for example, if the CES program was full or available for enrollment at the time the participant hoped to begin classes.

Subtheme: Work-life balance. Participants ranged in whether they were single, juggling families, and work, or continued to be in the military. Regardless of their life roles, all participants emphasized the challenges they faced during a CES PhD program balancing academic demands with their other life responsibilities.

Theme 3: Professional identity development. Participants positively responded to opportunities offered on campus for military personnel. Although time management could interfere with participation, the inclusion of military cultural components in programming and academic life supported participants in their ability to navigate their PhD.

Theme 4: Internal driving force. Participants all expressed an innate desire to finish, to complete a PhD, to succeed, and to remain focused on their goals. Participants associated these traits as helping them during their military career.

Subtheme: Barriers to success. Participants identified time management as a significant barrier to success due to unanticipated challenges of a PhD program. The significant culture shift from military to academic culture was also seen as an obstacle to be overcome and this involved developing new ways to learn how to communicate not only in concrete ways (military style learning) but through applying abstract thinking (PhD level academic learning) in both verbal and written forms.

Subtheme: Transition. Participants identified a significant difference between the military culture they are familiar with and the academic culture associated with their CES program. They shared how this involved both positive and negative experiences during their journey to degree completion. Participants shared how time taken by faculty and peers to recognize and acknowledge these cultural differences can add to the overall positive cultural learning experience for all students. A negative experience for many participants was found in the time it took them to adjust their learning style/writing to meet the expectations of their program. Participants did not anticipate the time it would take them to make this adjustment.

Theme 5: Military students and degree completion. Participants noted the significant challenges facing PhD students and this could be exacerbated by the military if the student was active duty. Despite this, participants saw a natural transition from where they are currently in their life and making the decision to embark on the CES program.

Subtheme: Military culture. Participants encouraged academic institutions to embrace military culture and not consider only enrollment of military students but ways in which to develop programs to cater to their needs once enrolled. Participants suggested one way to accomplish this would be to incorporate communication style, flat and formal versus informal and broad into curriculum. All participants considered their prior military service as a means to positively contribute to the CES program, class discussions, peer development, and the counseling profession.

Subtheme: Career journey. Participants were entering the CES PhD at a later stage in their career. They were unaware of CES programs prior to embarking on their military career. Participants reported a lack of awareness of CES programs and opportunities within the military as a reason for poor military student enrollment in the counseling profession. They also identified their master's program as an environment where conversations about whether to do a CES PhD took place with, peers and faculty dialogue leading to reasons they decided to shift from psychology to counseling for their PhD.

Theme 6: Environmental factors: Military, academic, and civilian. Participants pointed out how regardless of the counseling setting, as a counselor, you are probably going to engage with military personnel and therefore academic institutions should incorporate military content into CES programming.

Subtheme: Perceived legitimacy of CES programs. Participants made the observation, there is a significant disparity in counseling supervision hours between CES, social work, and psychology programs. Despite this, Veterans Affairs jobs may be more likely to hire psychology and social work graduates compared to LPC's. Participants considered a CES program more robust in preparing students for careers in academia, teaching, and developing competence in the counseling field.

Subtheme: Advocacy of the military culture in CES programs. Participants advocated for an increase in military personnel enrolling in CES programs to meet the needs of the military. Participants identified their military experience as a means to enhance the academic experience for CES peers. By advocating for military benefits, academic institutions can support military students currently enrolled in CES programs and reduce obstacles to degree completion. To transition into an academic environment, academic institutions can advocate for increased cultural awareness of military populations and the unique experiences they bring to the learning process.

Theme 7: Access to military counselors. Participants believed competency in working with military populations is important. The more prevalent military students are in CES programs the more competent counselors can become working with military populations. Due to the potential to face a military client, CES programs should incorporate military content into CES programming.

Interpretation of Findings

An outline of the findings will support an increased understanding of military CES student experiences. Initially an analysis of the findings will occur by comparing the findings to existing literature. This literature will incorporate both theoretical and empirical viewpoints. This analysis will be followed by a discussion of the findings and interpreted through the conceptual framework of this study. By viewing the findings through a hermeneutic phenomenological conceptual lens, I can understand the student experiences (phenomenon), and identify common threads and obstacles to graduation for a military student population. I accomplished this through the written medium of transcripts and following an organizational system that focused on seven narrative themes (Patterson & Williams, 2004). I contextualized the decisions and actions of the participants individually as well as aggregately, which aligned with the research question and purpose (Cypress, 2017; Patterson & Williams, 2004). This approach successfully provided findings in response to the primary and sub-question and supported literature findings.

To begin with, in alignment with Gardner's (2009) work, the findings of this research indicate doctoral student attrition has social consequences. For example, there is a societal need for military populations to receive mental health services and a lack of military competency in counselor educators coming through the pipeline to serve our communities. In addition, this research takes a positive step toward addressing the absence of literature that Gardner (2009) noted inhibits the higher education community. For example, by expanding our understanding of military students the higher education community can develop an increased understanding of the needs of military students. From this research we have learned that by developing military support networks, access mentoring, and be afforded the opportunity to visit and engage with CES faculty and students to determine their fit with the program. Gardner’s (2009) original observation that graduate students are self-aware is supported by this research and the what, why’s, and how’s of their doctoral journey has led to an unearthing of new data on the topic of graduate level experiences.

This research has built on the work of Perjessy (2013) and Carter et al., (2013) as they suggested lines of inquiry should be expanded to increase knowledge about CES programs. This research accomplished this by looking into military CES students yet still more needs to be done to assist the counseling profession in creating a pipeline of competent counselors for the future. This research discovered two possible ways to accomplish this, (i) participants suggested attending military career fairs and (ii) establishing military career pathways as a means to attract military personnel to CES programs. This will involve academic institutions evolving and government action in the form of legislation to generate pathways to CES programs for military students. Yet this research indicates in doing so, access will be created for military students to embark on CES career paths earlier and with more an increased opportunity to give back to their communities than prior populations. As Bagaka et al. (2015), and Pyhältö and Keskinen (2012) suggest, the benefit of creating the opportunity for military students to determine fit is degree completion. Yet, without these opportunities the counseling profession is possibly losing the chance to enroll future counselors. Participants in this study noted that social work and psychology already have an established footprint in the military and this can detract students from even considering a CES career track never mind going so far as to consider their fit for a program because opportunity for career advancement is simply not available to CES students in the way it is for social workers and psychology professionals.

Academic needs differed considerably due to the stage of career development participants in this study identified with. This stud y found retired military students had more flexible schedules whereas active duty military students faced considerable stressors in the event military and academic demands conflicted. Participants in this research stated the importance of faculty supporting and understanding their situation, in order to overcome obstacles such as this during their academic experience. Participants recommended acknowledging the unique characteristics and challenges faced by military students such as this to aid in degree completion for these students. For example, academic institutions can provide the structure and support they need to be able to reach degree completion, which aligns with Lovitt’s (2001) belief that support is important both and the beginning and throughout the academic journey.

Litalien et al. (2015) indicated academic needs, lifestyle, and socio-economic traits were key areas to focus on if matriculation and graduation rates are to increase. This research supports this observation and further suggests lifestyle should not be perceived at a superficial level, but rather an in-depth consideration of this trait should be embraced to fully appreciate the extent to which it impacts military student success. For example, when considering lifestyle from a multicultural perspective, military students in this study reported it can influence decision-making in all aspects of their life. For example, participants reported military culture influences all aspects of their learning, communication, and innate drive to succeed which was honed during their military years.

Student priorities and innate characteristics presented as key elements of this research that contributed toward success in a participant's journey to degree completion. Burkholder (2012) found personal issues factor significantly into a student's success or failure to complete a program. Participants of this research shared how work-life balance and cultural challenges lead to significant barriers to degree completion. These barriers were overcome by faculty essentially acknowledging the students' challenges and collaborating with them to reach a solution. In contract participants indicated if faculty were not supportive, attrition could easily occur. This finding aligns directly with Burkholders (2012) recommendation to solicit feedback from students to reduce attrition. For example, by creating a supportive environment OE was able to share her PTSD was interfering with her ability to complete classroom work and this lead to faculty adjusting programming to meet her needs and ultimately secured her success in the course and avoided a situation which could according the OE have led to attrition.

The depth of research findings unearthed in this study could be attributed to adopting a qualitative research approach. In contrast Litalien et al. (2015) utilized a quantitative research approach when researching attrition rates. Despite these contrasting methodological approaches, the findings of both studies indicate intrinsic characteristics are more important than demographics when determining whether a student will complete a program. Only one participant in this study had completed their CES PhD yet all participants attributed their military mentality of never quitting as a key factor influencing their ability to remain in a program to degree completion. Although demographics were identified as a factor to influence programming there were not identified as a prevalent theme shaping attrition rates.

Participants in this research identified access to military benefits such as the Post GI Bill as being beneficial particularly during their early academic careers. Yet participants also made observations that frequently these academic benefits were underutilized, PhD level programming did not receive the financial support undergraduate programs did, and academic resources to assist military students in accessing these resources was lacking, particularly due to the military's lack of acknowledgement of CES career pathways and unfamiliarity with the CES profession in general.

Participants in this study reflected the characteristics highlighted by De Pedro et al., (2014) in that they were older, (in second careers) have multiple life roles, and participated in hybrid model programs which grants them the flexibility to balance their lifestyle demands. However, unlike De Pedro et al., (2014) this research does not clearly delineate how heavily the participants relied on online programming, simply that hybrid programs were preferred. Instead, participants valued the cohort interaction and identified on-campus interactions as a key element of programs that assisted them with degree completion and feeling a sense of belonging which it should be noted, was a key factor they identified as significant during their time in the military.

Lambert and Morgan's (2009) observation that military work demands took precedence over schoolwork was apparent in this study, specifically for those in active duty. Academic institutions knowing this, have an opportunity to support students facing this type of conflict during their academic journey. All participants in this study emphasized the lack of flexibility and unpredictable demands associated with a military job. In contrast to the research of Lambert and Morgan (2009) this research did not clearly indicate a single reason why students favored online programming. Instead, this research suggested hybrid programs met military students' needs for a plethora of reasons including convenience, learning style, fit with the program and a desire to give back. When considering types of programming it is important to consider the influence of CACREP.

CACREP (2016) specifies curriculum and program standards to establish best practices in academia for the counseling profession. Despite this attempt to regulate programming, participants in this study felt program quality could differ significantly between academic institutions. This observation and the absence of military required curriculum serves to highlight the need for the counseling profession to take a fresh look at best practices moving forward and adopt a more inclusive approach to programming and curriculum content. In doing so, military needs can become increasingly met at the grassroots level. O'Herrin (2011) indicated programs and services were already being developed to enhance veteran success in higher education yet it appears from this research that these initiatives have not yet reached CES programs.

By developing comprehensive, inclusive programming such as this CES programs can develop future counselors who are competent in working with military populations. Without this education counselors' risk being unable at best and incompetent at worst to address the needs of military populations (Hall, 2016). Hall (2016) identified common presenting problems for military personnel including PTSD and stress which aligned with the experiences of this studies participants. Yet this research did not substantiate the argument that civilian counselors are not able to treat military clients due to their lack of military experiences. Rather, participants suggest military service can reassure the military client they will be understood at the onset of treatment.

Hayden et al. (2017) found military culture should be taken into consideration when treating military clients. This mirrors the findings of this research in that participants reported feeling understood, when they were interacting with a fellow military service member. This supports the belief that more military counselors should be sourced to meet the mental health needs of military populations. In addition, the prior research of Carrola and Corbin-Burdick (2015), Hall (2016), and Hall et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of competency when engaging with military clients and this research demonstrated the negative stigma that can result when such competence is lacking in the therapeutic relationship.

Participants in this study shared experiences that shed light on opportunities for academic institutions to evolve and better meet the needs of military students, yet participants did not identify any of their programs as addressing military needs to the extent DuMars et al. illustrated in their 2015 study of social work programs. Participants advocated for initiatives that would focus on how to align academic programming with governing body standards, and population needs. Yet, their academic institutions were not identified as groundbreaking when it came to be serving military populations. Certainly, in the 9 years since the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) circulated standards for advanced practice in military Social Work there has been ample time for the counseling profession to catch up with this model? Unfortunately, the standards established by social work to align programs with the governing *2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS; CSWE, 2008) that promote core competencies including risk assessment, resilience, coping strategies, social support in a military context, and deployment related health problems have not reached the counseling profession, at least not to the same degree.

The stigma facing military populations seeking mental health services is established (Sharp et al., (2015). Establishing military standards is one way to bridge this gap and address beliefs and behaviors that detrimentally impact military populations with mental health needs. Participants in this study agreed that military clients seeking services from a military competent counselor would be one way to overcome stigma. Yet there were conflicting responses from participants pertaining to the ability for civilian counselors to address this same military need. With some participants believing that civilian counselors would not be able to address stigma successfully compared to those counselors with military experience. Regardless of military experience, this research supports the initial premise made by Owens et al. (2009), and Pietrzak, et al., (2009) that the increased matriculation of military counselor educators can lead to a reduction is such stigma.

This research maintains military students embarking on CES programs bring valuable experience which can benefit the program as a whole. In addition, military students who embark on a CES program have the ability to address mental health needs both inside and outside of the military. Regardless of whether mental health services are provided in the military, or in a civilian setting, participants from this research aligned with Waitzkin's (2018) suggestion, that a means to address stigma and military mental health needs is by creating a pipeline of military competent counselors. In doing so, obstacles identified by Waitzkin (2018) such as a lack of appropriate services, a belief in ineffective care, and a belief that treatment can lead to a negative mark on one's military career can begin to be overcome. Participants in this research aligned with this rationale and further demonstrated a desire to advocate for their profession in military circles which could lead to a reduction in stigma. One way for the military to act and reflect the counseling professions ability meet their mental health needs is to incorporate counseling career paths and positions into the budget. For example, the DoD (2016) recommended 90 additional full-time psychologist positions costing approximately $85-$136 million to increase mental health screenings to align with physical screenings in the accession's screenings process. The counseling profession could fill this need at potentially lower cost to the military and yet only the psychology position was listed in the DoD (2016) report. Participants in this research all indicated their desire to work with military populations, and yet opportunities such as this are closed to CES professionals.

Literature findings were confirmed, and new information surfaced during the data analysis which are reflected in the seven emergent themes. The detailed participant experiences are unique in demographics and academic institutions yet show similarities of their academic experiences for example, time management challenges, a desire to give back, and drive to succeed.

Recommendations

There is a need for future research to examine counseling program curriculum that focuses on military needs. For example, social work and psychology professions have curriculum in accredited institutions designated to the needs of military populations whereas in the counseling profession this established curriculum is lacking. I would advocate to establish standards of military counseling practice that aligns with CACREPS Code of Ethics similar to the 12 standards of military social work practice which aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics. The research of Stebnicki et al. (2017) on military counseling content and curriculum among CACREP and Council on Rehabilitation Education accredited programs found of the 23.4 % of respondents (n=85) 100% denied existence of (a) certificate program, (b) specialty track, or (c) degree program that related to military counseling. DT went on to say,

> with a PhD counselor education and supervision, you may have more problems getting jobs with the VA… [than a] PhD in Psychology which could be attributed to the fact psychology students are receiving an education that covers military populations whereas counselors are not, at least not in as structured and comprehensive an approach. (DT Transcript)

One theme that emerged from the study was the abrupt shift from military learning to academic learning that participants experienced. Military learning was described by participants as structured, concrete, and required little writing aptitude whereas academic learning at the PhD level was described as fluid, requiring abstract thinking, and writing competency. With this in mind, academic institutions would benefit from the incorporation of onboarding programming to address academic skills that will assist military students in navigating this transition. Identifying ways in which to bridge these cultural gaps, Hall et al. (2018) suggested using Relational-Cultural Theory to support a therapeutic alliance when working with military clients as a civilian therapist. The findings of this research would suggest this approach may also be plausible for CES faculty when engaging with military students in a supervisory capacity. In addition, exploring avenues of communication for military students who have unique needs whether through peer support, or a military representation on campus would be beneficial.

It is also helpful that this same research be expanded upon and conducted with students participating in accredited PhD programs to increase our depth of understanding of this topic. Further phenomenological research analyzing the lived experiences of military students who do not complete counseling programs could further assist in the professions ability to increase retention rates for military students.

Correlational studies that examine the relationships between military rank and degree completion and even military branch and degree completion may be valuable. I recommend further research explores the experience of military students at online versus brick and mortar schools considering the required face time needed to develop counseling skills and the conflicting priorities military life presents for active military enrolled in a CES program.

Military students want to experience the culture of the program and institution, therefore opportunities to visit, sit-in classes, and meet with faculty and students to support their decision-making process can assist with this endeavor. This is an opportunity for academic institutions to look for opportunities to invite military personnel to learn more about counseling. By creating these opportunities for military students, CES programs become more accessible. DT suggested cohorts in Masters programs were a possible avenue to create interest in CES programs when she said, “I didn’t know too much about the CES program, I was mainly interested in furthering my education but I wasn’t quite sure in what, uh, capacity…When I started on the research, especially with my cohort…that is who I discussed the options with” (DT Transcript).

The findings of this research indicate CES PhD students are aware of the need for mental health services to be accessible to military populations. Yet there is a lack of competency in the profession to address that need, from both civilian counselors and counselors with military experience alike.

Implications

When considering how this research can impact social change, I considered social, psychological and practical implications. By adopting this multi-faceted approach to social change implications, I was able to discern key factors related to each approach. The participants were willing to share their personal experiences and were unafraid to speak out about the barrier they have faced which sets a positive example for future PhD CES military students.

Academic institutions can benefit from the knowledge that relatively simple and inexpensive changes could make a significant impact on completion rates. For example, if a CES program has a mentoring program lead by dedicated faculty, who endeavor to help support and guide service members and veterans enrolled in their CES program, this has the potential to increase the understanding of military life and military competency for all CES students at the institution. Society can benefit from this research when an increased number of military students enter communities to meet the mental health needs of military personnel and their families. By increasing military support during the CES program through mentoring initiatives this benefit can be realized. Another area that CES faculty can make a difference is the psychological impact they have on students.

Psychological benefits can occur within student populations as military students begin to witness and experience how CES faculty are willing to meet their needs and support their academic success. Faculty will experience the psychological benefit of seeing more of their student's graduate providing workplace satisfaction. Client populations will see their psychological needs met by competent counselors who understand and are able to speak to their military experiences and finally the psychological needs of communities will be met as a secondary beneficiary to successful treatment of military populations which make up such a profound percentage of American society. Yet these changes will not occur without investment from academic institutions.

The practical implications of this research involve an investment from academic institutions in a variety of ways. Hiring faculty with military experience can shape the academic experiences of military students in a positive way by incorporating their military experiences into the academic experience for their students. Academic institutions can incorporate military curriculum that can support the educational needs of counselors who will graduate and potentially serve military clients. Academic institutions can support the creation or incorporation of student support networks into CES programming to address the unique needs of military students such as deployment.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to positively impact the counseling profession by ensuring adequate representation of military competent counselors. By approaching the study through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, I have been able to develop a deep understanding of military student experiences in their PhD CES program. Distinct themes emerged that have the potential to inform academic institutions, the military, and the counseling profession about how to better serve our communities when it comes to their mental health needs. It has long been established that military populations have a clear need for mental health services. The counseling profession has the ability, and in my opinion duty to meet this need and through this research, some simple and easy steps have been outlined to do just that. The counseling profession has made great strides in establishing itself as a provider of mental health services to the military, yet with more and more military personnel returning to our communities with mental health needs, one could argue it is not enough. This research is a call to action, to the military, to the counseling profession and to individuals representing these populations to speak up, make social change happen, and live to witness the result of this change in the quality of life of American citizens everywhere.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Prior to each interview, participants will have signed an informed consent. Each participant will be informed that the interviews are to remain anonymous. Initially, I will attempt to establish rapport by explaining the interview process which I found effective.

The interview format involves one interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes. The research process will include an interview introduction, questions, and closing statement. The interview is researcher compiled as a pilot study with no prior research conducted to address the specific research phenomenon identified. The pilot study will address the dearth of research pertaining to military CES doctoral students and their lived experience toward degree completion. As the literature review contends, there is currently no prior research outlining the experiences of this student population.

The interview introduction, questions, and closing statement will follow the following template:

Introduction: Hello, my name is Nicola Hall, I am a student in Walden's University PhD program and want to thank you for participating in this interview. As a reminder, this interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will consist of 11 questions I have compiled regarding your journey toward degree completion as a military CES doctoral student. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Questions:

Project:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

1. What factors influenced your decision to seek a CES degree?

2. What factors influenced your decision to seek a doctoral education?

3. Can you tell me what the doctoral education experience has been like for you?

4. Have you encountered any barriers or struggles as you‘ve navigated through your doctoral education? 5. What factors helped you succeed/get this far?

6. If you could give other military students in high school or undergrad any advice as to what may help them succeed in college, what would that advice be?

7. What recommendations would you give to educators to help military students further their education?

8. What could high schools, colleges, and/or universities do to encourage military students to further their education?

9. What else would you like to tell me about your experience as a military student who has pursued a CES doctoral degree?

10. What have I forgotten to ask that you feel is important?

11. How are you feeling right now?

Closing statement: Thank individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews.

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate via E-mail

Hello,

I hope this note finds you well.

I am in the Walden Counselor Supervision and Education doctoral program. As part of my research, I'm conducting qualitative research interviews to develop an increased understanding of the lived experiences of military students that pursue a career as a Counselor Educator and/or Supervisor in a CACREP accredited doctoral program. I hope this research will serve to provide academic institutions with suggestions on how to improve the academic experiences for military counselors seeking to complete a doctoral degree in the counseling field. In doing so, the counseling profession can benefit from seeing increased graduation rates and increased representation of culturally diverse students entering the profession.

I'm seeking Counselor Education and Supervision students currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited program or those who have graduated within 12 months of the date of this email to participate. Would you be interested in assisting?

The research will include completing an Informed Consent statement (I'll e-mail this to you); and allowing me to *interview you either in person or by phone*. The whole process should take no more than 60 minutes of your time.

Please let me know if you would like to participate. The course has deadlines, so we'll need to begin the process by September 1, 2018, and finish the interview by September 15, 2018.

You can contact me by phone (insert phone number) or email (insert email) if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Nicola Hall, M.Ed., LPC, CSAC,

Walden University

CES PhD Student

Appendix C: Phone Call Invitation Script

Hi (name of participant),

My name is Nicola Hall, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am currently seeking participants for my qualitative dissertation study that is focused on exploring the lived experiences of military CES doctoral students on their journey to degree completion. You were selected for this study because of research you have published or presented in the counselor education field. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. This study has passed the institutional review board.

If you are interested in participating, I would be happy to provide further information on participating in this study.

If the participant responds yes:

I am seeking Counselor Educators who meet the following criteria:

(1) Have a PhD in counselor education at a CACREP accredited school, or (2) are currently enrolled in a CACREP accredited PhD CES program, or (3) were enrolled in a CES doctoral program in the past 12 months. (4) You will also need to access a phone, the internet, and email. (5) Can commit to a 60-90-minute interview at a time of your choosing (6) Provide follow-up information after the interview

If this is something you might be interested in participating in, I would be happy to send you an informed consent document that will discuss everything I went over in detail. Once you have a chance to take a look at the informed consent, we will schedule a time to conduct a 60-90-minute interview. The interview will be scheduled at a time and format of your convenience. The interview can be done in person if you’re not too far from the Hampton Roads area, or by phone or video conferencing. Whichever is easiest for you.

Thank you for your willingness to speak with me today. I will look forward to talking with you again soon. Have a good day.

If the participant responds no:

Thank you for your willingness to speak with me today. I appreciate your time. Have a good day.

Appendix D: Follow-Up Phone Call Invitation Script

Hi (participant name),

I am following up with you to let you know that our interview has been transcribed and is available for you to complete a member check. I can email you a copy of the transcribed interview or I can send you a hard copy, whichever you prefer. If you could please reply to this email with your preference (a hard copy of the interview or an emailed copy), I will send you the interview data to review. Thank you again for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Warmly,
Nicola Hall

Appendix E: List of Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Helping Other Veterans/Giving Back

- Continued development
- Teaching

Theme 2: Programmatic fit

- Hybrid model programs
- Military student enrollment
- Work-life balance

Theme 3: Professional Identity Development

Theme 4: Internal Driving Force

- Barriers to success
- Transition

Theme 5: Military Students and Degree completion

- Military culture
- Career journey

Theme 6: Environmental Factors: Military, Academic, and Civilian

- Perceived legitimacy of CES programs
- Advocacy of the military culture in CES programs.

Theme 7: Access to Military Counselors