5-2024

# National Guard Students and Academic Disruptions: A Case Study of How Academic Disruptions Impact College Outcomes

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**National Guard Students and Academic Disruptions: A Case Study of How Academic Disruptions Impact College Outcomes**

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

In

Higher Education and Student Affairs


May, 2024

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**Abstract**

The United States was involved in the longest sustained military conflict in modern history in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 (Megerian, 2021). Members of the National Guard played a vital role in supporting war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hitt et al., 2015). These service members serve a dual federal and state function, they can deploy to war zones overseas and can be mobilized state-side to support state emergencies (Molina & Morse, 2015). Mobilization of National Guard students in support of various military efforts has been theorized to lead to issues with re-enrolling in college (Cate et al., 2017). The case study explored the effectiveness of re-enrollment policies for National Guard students after an academic disruption at a small Regional Public University (RPU) in the South. Examination of current re-enrollment policies and their effectiveness are critical as National Guard students often experience multiple academic disruptions during their time in college.

*Keywords:* National Guard students, academic disruptions, re-enrollment

**Dedication**

I dedicate this study to all current and former service members of the United States (US) Armed Forces. Selfless sacrifice is not a common trait shared by most people, for the few that have it we should do our very best to love and support them. I would argue that we are seeing historic amounts of current and former service members entering higher education institutions all around the US. Our colleges and universities, and higher education researchers, have not done a good job of trying to understand the nuances of service and pursuing post-secondary education. Within this context, I offer up this study as but one piece of a missing puzzle that needs to be investigated on a more regular basis. We owe it to these current and former service members.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Students that are actively serving in the military have vastly different college experiences than student veterans (Mobley et al., 2022). Student veterans have served in the past but are now able to devote their full attention to college and personal obligations. Deployment and mobilization patterns for National Guard students are very complex, more so than active duty students, because of the multiple activations and deactivations from active duty status (Mobley et al., 2022). National Guard students have historically operated in this fashion (Bauman, 2009) so higher education professionals should figure out how to support their successful re-entry into college. Unfortunately, that is not the case, as most colleges still struggle with how to encourage the re-enrollment of National Guard students after an academic disruption (Livingston et al., 2011).

National Guard students are difficult to support because there is no one size fits all approach to their academic re-entry after a deployment or mobilization (Mobley et al., 2022). I have experienced this firsthand in my professional experience as the main advocate for military-connected students on a college campus. It was always something I knew that I struggled with, how to appropriately support National Guard students through their routine academic disruptions. It became very apparent during the 2020 calendar year, as increasing numbers of my National Guard students were leaving to not only deploy overseas in support of our final missions in Afghanistan, but also mobilize in support of pandemic mitigation efforts, natural disaster relief, and security efforts for nationwide protests and riots.

Anecdotally, it seemed that I talked with several National Guard students a week during the Spring and Summer 2020 semesters about what their options were to either complete their classes or withdraw with minimal academic or financial penalty. I noticed over the next several

semesters that some of those students re-enrolled and some never came back to our college. I was aware that some of those students could have chosen to attend another college, but my gut reaction was that they never came back to college after their deployment or mobilization. What was at the root cause of their decision not to come back to our college? Was it a lack of motivation on their part, less than helpful re-enrollment policies, or feelings that the college did not value them? It is imperative that I figure out why as it impacts my ability to advocate for better policies or support initiatives aimed at easing their re-enrollment.

The United States was involved in the longest sustained military conflict in modern history in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 (Megerian, 2021). According to the DoD SkillBridge (2022), over 200,000 service members are discharged from the military every year. Those service members will now be looking for pathways to reintegrate into society. Separating service members would historically look to the workforce as their preferred reintegration path but have found a struggling economy at times since 2008 (Lang & O'Donnell, 2017). The height of unemployment for Post 9/11 veterans was 2011 when veterans had an unemployment rate of 12.1% compared to 9% for nonveterans and the youngest veterans (18-24) had an unemployment rate of 29.1% (Rosser, 2021). The unemployment rate has rebounded since then for veterans to never exceed 5% between October 2015 and March 2020 (Rosser, 2021).

Each year separating service members attempting to enter the workforce are met with a challenging path to reintegration. An alternative path was provided to student service members/veterans (SSM/Vs) in 2008 with the passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The United States has a long history of providing educational benefits to SSM/Vs, but the adoption of the Post 9/11 GI Bill provided significantly more post-secondary funding than other versions (Hitt et al., 2015). The Post 9/11 GI Bill has become a generational game changer, in fact it has led many

veterans, especially younger veterans, to use higher education as a transitional alternative to entering the workforce (Lang & O'Donnell, 2017).

Overall, the amount of SSM/Vs has grown exponentially on our campuses since the passing of the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Vest et al., 2020). It has been estimated that since 2011, over 1 million eligible SSM/Vs use GI Bill benefits on our campuses each year (Vest et al., 2020). With the influx of SSM/Vs into higher education institutions, it has become important to research and understand how to best support their academic, personal, and social needs. The SSM/V population on our campuses are unique and require a variety of analyses to capture their complexities. Higher education researchers have started to dive into this new research endeavor with a limited impact.

## Background to the Study

Members of the National Guard played a vital role in supporting war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hitt et al., 2015). These service members serve a dual federal and state function, they can deploy to war zones overseas and can be mobilized state-side to support state emergencies (Molina & Morse, 2015). National Guard students encapsulate a population of students who are often overlooked or misunderstood on college campuses. Deployments and mobilization of National Guard students in support of our war efforts led to delays in completing degree programs and overall academic instability (Bauman, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Although National Guard students played a vital role in our most recent war efforts, research tends to focus on active-duty service members and student veterans.

It is easy to understand why researchers have focused on active-duty service members and veterans, as they account for most of the SSM/V population in higher education. According to the 2011-2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, there were a total of 1,132,860 SSM/Vs attending college in the United States (Molina & Morse, 2015). Of that number,

855,862 identified as student veterans, 170,790 identified as active-duty, 74,310 identified as Reservists, and 31,898 identified as National Guard (Molina & Morse, 2015). Unemployment rates have remained low for Post 9/11 National Guard members at 3.2% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022) which helps to explain why there has not been a lot of interest in researching National Guard students individually. The growing interest in researching the SSM/V population is warranted as the need to support these students has increased over the last decade.

Recent studies have focused on many issues facing SSM/Vs within higher education. Several studies have examined health-related issues that SSM/Vs face when pursuing higher education. Barry et al. (2012) evaluated SSM/Vs compared to civilian peers to determine whether there were links between drinking and mental health issues. The researchers found no difference in the frequency of drinking between SSM/Vs and civilian students but did find that SSM/Vs are more likely to use drinking as a coping mechanism for mental health issues. Drinking behaviors and mental health issues reduces the ability of SSM/Vs to integrate into and progress through college (Barry et al., 2012).

Pelts et al. (2019) evaluated the differences in health characteristics by sexual orientation within the SSM/V community. The health status and needs of SSM/Vs in higher education are still relatively unknown. Previous research had found that SSM/Vs in higher education are more likely to have health behaviors linked to diminished health outcomes compared to non-veteran peers. According to Pelts et al. (2019), researchers have identified alcohol and drug use and risky sexual behaviors as key health behaviors that lead to negative health outcomes. Gay and lesbian SSM/Vs are two times more likely to be diagnosed with a respiratory illness and 5.86 times more likely to be diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV; Pelts et al., 2019).

Hodges et al. (2022) studied the challenges that SSM/Vs face in higher education and how those contribute to negative academic outcomes and sense of isolation. One the three major categories that researchers identified were health-related challenges of SSM/Vs. Researchers found that SSM/Vs experience higher rates of behavioral and physical health concerns and seek treatment for health concerns at lower rates than their civilian peers (Hodges et al., 2022). These health-related challenges have a negative effect on SSM/V academic outcomes in college. Behavior concerns in SSM/Vs have been found to negatively impact academic performance and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression are associated with educational impairment with student veterans (Hodges et al., 2022).

Additional studies have investigated perceptions of support, academic readiness, and engagement for SSM/Vs in higher education. Fernandez et al. (2019) were interested in what factors within the classroom affected a student's decision to drop out of college. Those researchers found that SSM/Vs that felt valued by their faculty members were less likely to drop out compared to being valued by their peers (Fernandez et al., 2019). Barry et al. (2021) researched whether military status impacted a student's sense of belonging. These researchers delineated between SSM/Vs, National Guard and Reservists, and civilians and found that civilians had the highest sense of belonging and SSM/Vs had the lowest. They compared sense of belonging (or fit on campus) and SSM/V status and found a negative correlation (Barry et al., 2021).

In their study of challenges SSM/Vs face in higher education, Hodges et al., (2022) found that SSM/Vs had a perceived lack of preparation for college and considered themselves novices compared to their traditional peers. They argued that college administrators needed to take the complexity of military service into account when preparing support programs and training

faculty and staff. Coordination, training, and inclusive classrooms will help rather than

discourage SSM/Vs academic pursuits (Hodges et al., 2022). Southwell et al. (2018) agreed that

military experience is an essential component to consider regarding SSM/V retention.

Deployments and combat exposure could provide additional impediments to success that are

unique to the military experience (Southwell et al., 2018).

Southwell et al. (2018) examined how SSM/Vs engaged campus support services and

personnel and how those interactions related to educational outcomes. These researchers

evaluated the frequency of SSM/Vs visiting faculty or academic advisors, general support offices

(financial aid, bursar, and registrar), and participation in student clubs. They found that SSM/Vs

visited faculty and academic advisors less than their traditional peers, but that the quality of the

interaction was more important to academic persistence (Southwell et al., 2018). Another

interesting point unearthed in this research was that as the amount of advisor and faculty member

visits increased, the perception of institutional supportiveness and expectations of degree

completion enhanced (Southwell et al., 2018).

The recent research studies have provided valuable context to the research base of

SSM/Vs in higher education. What the recent research is lacking is a focus on National Guard

students and how they are affected by and interact with higher education institutions. Most recent

studies (Hodges et al., 2022; Barry et al., 2021; Fernandez et al., 2019; Pelts et al., 2019;

Southwell et al., 2018; Barry et al., 2012) focus on the SSM/V student population, but significant

differences exist within this population. Even when researchers differentiate between the

different SSM/V student groups (Barry et al., 2021), significant focus in the research is given to

how active-duty students and student veterans are affected by and interact with higher education

institutions.

**Problem Statement**

Within this context, this study sought to address gaps in the research by focusing on how mobilizations affect the academic stability of National Guard students on college campuses. There exists a dearth of research focused on National Guard students overall and very little has been completed on how higher education institutions mitigate the academic disruption of National Guard students' military obligations. Institutions can mitigate these academic disruptions through the development of effective re-enrollment policies (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This study evaluated the real-world experiences of National Guard students and the staff members who supported them when they attempted to re-enroll in college after an academic disruption. The study's goal was to identify best practices and policies and procedures that could be improved to better support National Guard students continued academic journeys.

**Purpose of the Study**

This case study explored the effectiveness of re-enrollment policies and procedures for National Guard students at a small, Regional Public University (RPU) in the South. National Guard students experience constant academic disruption due to their military obligations and college policies and procedures have a direct impact on their ability to re-enroll in college. Successful re-enrollment policies and procedures should facilitate easy re-entry into college after an academic disruption caused by military service. This case study explored how National Guard students experienced their transition back into college after an academic disruption of at least one semester and how that disruption impacted their ability to re-enroll in college.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is important because it gave insights into how we can support National Guard students on campuses all over this country that experience academic disruptions. It

provided recommendations for how higher education professionals can develop policies for supporting National Guard students who leave on last-minute mobilizations and come back to finish their education. The knowledge gained from this research will add to the current research on SSM/Vs and provide a unique perspective on best practices for alleviating the academic disruptions of National Guard students. The nature of National Guard students' military service will continue to require their abrupt departures from college campuses, it is important to understand how our colleges can develop re-enrollment policies that reward, not punish, National Guard students for their military service.

## Research Questions

This case study explored several avenues to explain how military mobilizations affect the academic lives of National Guard students. Specifically, it sought to gather relevant information regarding how academic disruptions impact National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college. The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do National Guard students describe their experiences of re-entry into college after an academic disruption?

2. How do academic disruptions due to military service affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college?

3. How do administrators perceive the impact of institutional policies and procedures on their ability to help National Guard students re-enroll in college after an academic disruption?

## Overview of Methodology and Methods

According to Yin (2018), case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a specific case and gain a real-world, holistic perspective of the phenomenon. A case study approach worked very

well for this study for several reasons. First, it allowed me to study contemporary events that have relevant behaviors that I cannot manipulate. Second, it allowed me to focus heavily on direct observations of the event being studied and interview people still involved in the events (Yin, 2018). I interviewed current National Guard students who have experienced at least one semester of academic disruption and staff members who support National Guard students during the disruptions to better understand their experiences of re-enrolling in college after the disruption. I used that knowledge and compared it to the current re-enrollment policies and procedures at an RPU in the South to see if those policies and procedures are having the intended outcome of ensuring National Guard students can easily re-enroll in college after the disruption.

**Theoretical Framework**

National Guard students experience mobilizations in phases as they prepare to leave and return from military service obligations. Bauman (2009) identified three phases of military mobilization that National Guard students experience in the lead-up to and return from military mobilizations. Phase one focuses on pre-mobilization when National Guard students know they are leaving but do not have any details about when that will happen. Phase two focuses on separation as students know for sure that they are mobilizing and start to separate from aspects of their civilian lives. Phase three focuses on return as students start to return home and reintegrate back into their civilian lives (Bauman, 2009).

A critical aspect of college success for non-traditional students is if they feel validated by in and out of class agents during their college careers (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Validation theory was developed to show that validating non-traditional students in a college setting would lessen doubts about their ability to learn and impacted overall academic success (Bondi et al., 2020). This is even more relevant to National Guard students experiencing the

phases of military mobilizations. These students tend to doubt their ability to finish classes successfully when they leave unexpectedly and are unsure how they will re-integrate back into college life when they return (Bauman, 2009). Providing validating experiences to these non-traditional students will help to overcome their existing anxieties, fears, and prior invalidation experiences (Bondi et al., 2020).

## Objectives and Outcomes

Through this study, I learned several things about the experiences of National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. First, I learned about their experiences as they moved between each phase of military mobilization. Second, I learned that National Guard students received a variety of support needed to re-enroll in college after the academic disruption. Third, I learned which current re-enrollment policies and procedures helped or hindered National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college after an academic disruption. Lastly, I learned what recommendations can be made to implement new or adapt current policies and procedures to positively impact the re-enrollment of National Guard students after an academic disruption.

## Key Terms

According to Bauman (2009), the disruptive mobilizations of SSM/Vs are similar to the stopping out process for traditional students. Stopping out refers to students who do not complete their plans of study within a normal period, skip at least one semester, and then re-enroll in college. The term stopping out does not accurately describe the experience of National Guard students because they often experience mid-semester withdrawals and subsequent re-enrollments multiple times during college (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). To better understand and identify recommendations for future support initiatives, it is important to differentiate between stopping

out and what National Guard students experience (Mobley et al., 2022). Within this context, I believe that the term academic disruption more accurately defines what National Guard students experience when their military service impacts their college success.

For the sake of this study, I defined mobilizations as a deployment to a war zone or an activation in support of a stateside support effort such as hurricane cleanup, tornado cleanup, wildfire support, pandemic support, etc. The unpredictability of mobilizations causes a lot of uncertainty for National Guard students and their families (Bauman, 2009). Mobilization patterns for National Guard students can be complex as they often include multiple activation and deactivation periods (Mobley et al., 2022). This is what makes National Guard students unique, they can be activated for a mobilization to support a local, state, or international military effort. That is also why National Guard students can face multiple and unpredictable mobilization periods while in college.

The SSM/V population includes students with a wide variety of experiences in and obligations to the military that could impact their success in college. National Guard students represent a unique part of the military, as they can serve both part-time and full-time based off the needs of the state or federal governments (Hitt et al., 2015). These students can serve locally, nationally, or internationally depending on the needs of their states or the federal government. Active-duty service members are those who serve full-time in the military and the workload is not confined to 40 hours a week or regular business hours (Molina & Morse, 2015). Student veterans are those who have served in the military, are no longer active in any component of the military, and are attending college (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The first chapter of this dissertation covers the problem to be researched and its background within the overall research conducted with military-connected students in higher education. It also covers the study's purpose and significance, the overall research methodology and questions, and its limitations. Chapter two goes in depth into the literature review of military-connected students in higher education to include: basic definitions of the groups associated, history of the military and higher education, and funding and supporting these students in higher education. Chapter three discusses the research perspective for the study, design of the study, participants involved in the study, and how the study will be organized. Chapter four covers the findings of the study and chapter five discusses the implications of the findings and presents recommendations for future research and practice.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Before this study can explore successful re-enrollment policies for National Guard students, it is important to look at how SSM/V involvement on college campuses has evolved over time in the United States (US). The relationship between the military and college campuses has grown out of need for knowledge development and training and increased federal and state support for education benefits. Colleges in the US had to develop programs, policies, and procedures to support increased numbers of SSM/Vs on campus. Due to the rapid growth of SSM/Vs on campus and the different needs of each institution, inconsistent levels of support were developed (Arminio et al., 2015).

Inconsistent levels of support coupled with limited knowledge of how to best support SSM/Vs led to uneven academic results (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Some of the support issues are due to the uniqueness of the SSM/V population and the inherent differences between each group: active-duty, National Guard, and student veterans. Each group within the SSM/V student population has access to different levels of financial support, which is a complicated factor for colleges. Group dynamics, funding differences, and levels of support needed ultimately affect retention for SSM/Vs. The specific retention aspect highlighted by this study is the availability and type of re-enrollment policies present for National Guard students.

**Historical Relationship of Higher Education and the Military**

The military has had a wide-ranging impact on the evolution of American higher education and continues to impact our college campuses today (Serow, 2004). The relationship between the military and higher education can be traced back to colonial times when college campuses were used to develop citizens for military service (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This connection was strengthened with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 by establishing military

training programs at land-grant colleges (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 brought the military and higher education closer together as they brought higher education institutions into military research efforts (Arminio et al., 2015).

**Early Impact on College Campuses**

After the passage of the Morrill Acts, the federal government started to hand out competitive grants to research universities to develop advanced tools for warfare (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Research universities had the experts needed to develop new technologies and understandings of foreign cultures. The National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) were early funding sources for military research grants on college campuses (Arminio et al., 2015). Even though both military and university leaders foresaw the benefit of early military training programs and research presence on campus, inevitable conflicts persisted due to the conflicting natures of the military and higher education (Arminio et al., 2015).

In 1916, Congress passed the National Defense Act (NDA) right before the United States entered World War I (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Initial efforts at a military and higher education training collaboration on campus started in 1918 with the development of the Student Army Training Corps (SATC; Arminio et al., 2015). The Department of the Army needed to train soldiers who could be activated at any time and college campuses needed to supplement enrollment declines caused by the World War I draft (Arminio et al., 2015). The inexpensive SATC program was disbanded after three months due to the end of World War I (Arminio et al. 2015). The SATC program did not survive, but the need to train future military officers on campus did not go away.

According to Rumann & Hamrick (2009), the NDA accomplished two important goals. First, it created the three components of the military that we still have today: active-duty, national guard, and reserves. Second, it created the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) that standardized military training programs on more college campuses. ROTC units are present on college campuses across the US today and have trained a significant number of military officers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The need to train future military officers in the most advanced military technologies and tactics has persisted since the passing of the NDA (Arminio et al., 2015).

**GI Bill**

It can be argued that no other historical development has impacted the relationship of the military and higher education like the passage of the GI Bill. The GI Bill is credited with ushering in a period of mass access to higher education for some student veterans in stark contrast to preceding periods when college-going was largely reserved for elites (Serow, 2004). American colleges have experienced a huge influx of military-connected students since the passing of the initial GI Bill in 1944 and its subsequent improvements since have provided access to expanded education benefits (Hitt et al., 2015). This influx of veterans caused an unparalleled expansion of American higher education as referenced by the fact that during the 1947-1948 academic year almost 50% of all college students nationally were veterans (Loss, 2005).

The path to our current GI Bill of Rights has had many turns, including political opposition to the passing of what has come to be one of the biggest federal social welfare programs of its time (Serow, 2004; Mettler, 2005). The GI Bill has expanded its impact over time from early pension payments for disabled veterans, to direct educational support for student

veterans, to the enhanced educational support of spouses and children of service members (Mettler, 2005). The genesis of the GI Bill of Rights can be tracked back to our nation's earliest military conflicts and how our elected officials decided to support service members transitioning back into civilian life (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The GI Bill was more than a social welfare program, it helped massive amounts of returning service members (and later their families) access the education needed to find meaningful employment after their military careers.

The United States has a long history of providing social provisions for veterans of military conflicts (Vacchi & Berger, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Initially, the US gave pension benefits to disabled or destitute veterans after the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Mexican War (Mettler, 2005). In 1862, Civil War veterans were given pensions to those who had suffered a disability in military service, death benefits for veterans' dependents, and preferred status to acquire land (Mettler, 2005). In 1890, Congress expanded benefits based on financial need, age, length of service, and for deaths or disabilities that were not service related (Mettler, 2005). Despite reticence from policymakers during World War I (WWI) to pay veterans' pensions for their service or disability, Congress passed bonus legislation in 1924 (Mettler, 2005).

The bonus legislation was a step forward for veterans' benefits, but WWI veterans could not benefit from that legislation until 1945 (Arminio et al., 2015). The Depression hit in 1931 and veterans started calling for early payments on their WWI bonuses. The US's economic situation was worsening in 1932 and WWI veterans put together a Bonus Army to descend on Washington to demand immediate payment of their promised bonuses (Mettler, 2005). President Hoover refused to meet with the marchers and instead commanded the US army to disband the marchers that same year (Arminio et al., 2015). President Roosevelt further distanced the Federal

Government from WWI veterans by passing the 1933 Economy Act that repealed many financial

benefits for non-disabled WWI veterans (Mettler, 2005). Ultimately WWI veterans got the

promised bonuses in 1936 when Congress approved a $2 billion bonus bill despite Roosevelt's

veto (Mettler, 2005).

The Bonus Army, and subsequent poor treatment of WWI veterans, had a lasting impact

on how future generations of veterans would be treated (Arminio et al., 2015). According to

Mettler (2005), as World War II (WWII) was coming to an end, President Roosevelt started to

shift his domestic focus towards post-war planning, which included how to incorporate a huge

amount of returning service members into the civilian population. There was a lot of concern

over high rates of unemployment of returning service members (Arminio et al., 2015) and the

federal government believed that it was the duty of the government to ensure that these service

members found suitable long-term employment (Mettler, 2005). Administration officials did not

want service members to experience an interruption in their ability to earn a decent living

because they served in the military during war time. Within that context, President Roosevelt

created the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB) to provide policy suggestions for long-

term post-war planning (Mettler, 2005).

The NRPB viewed educational policies as a main catalyst for ensuring suitable

employment and continuity of income for returning service members (Mettler, 2005). The NRPB

looked at two sources for guidance on how to develop legislation that would address the

concerns of reintegration: the Wisconsin Educational Bonus Law of 1919 and Canadian

Committee on Demobilization and Readjustment. The Wisconsin Educational Bonus Law of

1919 provided benefits for WWI veterans by providing access to continued education at public,

agricultural, vocational schools, and universities plus minimal administrative intervention by the

government and cash bonuses of $30 per month for up to four academic years (Mettler, 2005). The Canadian Committee provided bonuses of $60 per month for single veterans, additional benefits for married veterans with dependents, and a fixed timeframe to use the benefits based on length of service (Mettler, 2005).

After consideration of these two policies, the NRPB developed a plan where veterans received one year of education or training, separation pay of $100 per month for the three months after they left the military, and unemployment benefits for up to 26 weeks within the year after they left the military (Mettler, 2005). Eligibility for this program was restricted to competitive examinations and veterans could only use their benefits in select programs that supplied trained workers to high-demand fields (Mettler, 2005). This proposal was not widely accepted and ultimately was not considered by President Roosevelt.  Roosevelt changed courses and convened the Osborn Committee in 1942 with the express purpose of providing policy suggestions for veterans only, as opposed to the NRPB that focused on all aspects of post-war planning (Mettler, 2005).

The Osborn committee put forth a plan called the Osborn Report which included a system of federal grants supplemented by federal loans. All veterans who served six months received one year of education and training, additional years of educational benefits to veterans who showed great promise in an industry of need and provided monthly allowances of $50 for single veterans and $75 for married veterans (Mettler, 2005). The Osborn Report did a decent job of combining some of the political ambitions of this era by limiting the amount of bonus money paid to veterans, addressing the lack of college graduates affected by the war, and it was a crucial component of the government's post-war national security strategy (Loss, 2012). Simultaneously

there was momentum building within Congress and veteran advocacy groups to implement new bonus programs for returning veterans (Mettler, 2005).

Several bills were submitted in Congress championing WWII veterans' benefits while the Osborn Committee published its report, including one authored by the American Legion. Historically the American Legion was never in favor of the bonus programs for veterans (Arminio et al., 2015), instead they preferred jobs programs that ensured the long-term employability of veterans after they reintegrated to the civilian world (Mettler, 2005). The American Legion consulted with various experts in the field and took components of work done previously by the American Council on Education, the NRPB, and the Osborn Report to craft their legislation (Mettler, 2005). After submitting its bill, the American Legion went on a massive grassroots public relations campaign (Mettler, 2005) to force political and societal support (Serow, 2004).

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) was passed into law on June 22, 1944, and included several benefits (Arminio et al., 2015). The GI Bill included education provisions for any veteran who served at least 90 days and did not have a dishonorable discharge. They received an additional year of benefit for each additional year served up to four years, all education costs up to $500 per year, and monthly allowances of $50 for single veterans and $75 for married veterans (Mettler, 2005).  The GI Bill was also responsible for supplying additional benefits to veterans outside of the educational realm.  Due to this legislation, veterans gained access to counseling, disability, unemployment benefits, and low-interest loans (Loss, 2005).

The GI Bill was remarkable because it was passed during a time when racial discrimination was prevalent in American society and the military had yet to desegregate (Serow,

2004). The GI Bill did not levy racial restrictions on the funding, all that was needed to qualify was honorable service and a minimum amount of time served in the military (Mettler, 2005). The legislative guarantees of equality for Black veterans did not guarantee equality of opportunity as up to 20,000 Black veterans did not attend college due to overcrowding in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and exclusion from White institutions (Serow, 2004). The well-intentioned development of the GI Bill could not overcome the reality of American society at its passage. Underrepresented groups of veterans still faced equality of access to a college education, Black veterans in the South were not able to leverage the GI Bill positively due to racist state policies and a lack of access to colleges (Arminio et al., 2015).

Policymakers and the public viewed the GI Bill not as an entitlement but a good financial investment in those who had rendered significant service to the nation (Serow, 2004). By the end of the WWII GI Bill, approximately eight million veterans used that GI Bill to complete high school, earn a vocational certificate, or go to college (Cate, 2017). This investment continued into the 1950s with the Korean GI Bill and the 1970s with the Vietnam GI Bill (Arminio et al., 2015). Within five years of the passage of the Korean GI Bill, approximately two million Korean veterans used its educational provisions (Cate, 2017). Researchers have had a difficult time finding accurate numbers of Vietnam veterans using that GI Bill due to several changes in its lifetime (Arminio et al., 2015).

Several additional GI Bills have been instituted since the end of the Vietnam War to include the Montgomery GI Bill, Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP), Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (DEA), and the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry scholarship (Arminio et al., 2015). Each of these programs has provided an impact for the SSM/V or dependent that qualifies for the benefit. It can be argued that the biggest educational

impact on SSM/Vs and dependents was the passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. At the height of

U.S. involvement in both wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Post 9/11 GI Bill was approved in

2008 which significantly improved post-secondary funding for military members and their

families (Hitt et al., 2015).

The latest iteration of the GI Bill was leveraged by the branches of the military to recruit

and retain service members when the military was struggling with maintaining appropriate

personnel levels (Hitt et al., 2015). The Post 9/11 GI Bill provided generous funding for 36

months towards tuition and fees, monthly housing allowance, and a book and supply stipend

(Arminio et al., 2015). This GI Bill is available to active-duty, National Guard, student veterans,

and dependents (parents or spouses served) who have at least 90 days of active-duty service. The

Post 9/11 GI Bill is an expensive investment in our SSM/Vs and dependents that has sent a large

cohort of students into US higher education institutions (Hitt et al., 2015). Even though the Post

9/11 GI Bill brought more SSM/Vs into US colleges, the promise of gaining social mobility

through a college degree was not guaranteed for historically underrepresented groups (Arminio

et al., 2015).

The Post 9/11 GI Bill increased access to college both in the short-term and long-term.

By the end of 2011, the number of Veterans Affairs education benefit users was over 500,000

(Hitt et al., 2015). By 2015 the Post 9/11 GI Bill provided educational support for more than 1.4

million SSM/Vs and their family members (Molina & Morse, 2015). Between 2016-2019 that

number grew to roughly 3 million students (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). In

Fiscal Year 2019, 56% of SSM/Vs pursued undergraduate degrees, 20% pursued two-year

degrees, 14% pursued vocational or technical degrees, and 10% pursued graduate degrees

(Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). For all the positives created by the Post 9/11 GI Bill,

there is still inequity in which SSM/Vs access their education benefits. According to Morse and

Molina (2017), 62% of White veterans and 60% of Asian veterans used their VA education

benefits as a first-year undergraduate student compared to 55% of Latino veterans and 52% of

Black veterans. Figuring out why there is a big gap in education benefit usage between racial

groups is a need for future research.

<div style="text-align:center"><strong>Group Differences for SSM/Vs</strong></div>

The idea that SSM/Vs are essentially a homogeneous group of students with similar

needs and life requirements is false (Bondi et al., 2020). Even though each group can share

common traits with other non-traditional learners (Lunceford et al., 2020), each group has

distinctive service commitments and personal obligations. It is important to identify these

differences as it will impact how US colleges support and provide educational experiences to

SSM/Vs. A one-size-fits-all approach to SSM/Vs can lead to the development of policies and

support systems that conflate substantive differences that influence higher education access and

success (Molina & Morse, 2015). A more nuanced approach to understanding the SSM/V

population is needed to ensure that US colleges are approaching lingering issues regarding

SSM/V access and success appropriately (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**National Guard**

National Guard students represent a unique part of the military, as they can serve both

part-time and full-time based off the needs of the state or federal governments (Hitt et al., 2015).

National Guard units are descendants of state militias that report directly to the governor of their

state (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). National Guard students can serve in either the Air Force or

Army (Lunceford et al., 2020) and are mobilized to support domestic needs such as national

disaster relief and support, security for protests or riots, and support of medical emergencies

(pandemics). National Guard units can also participate in international deployments supplementing active-duty units (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009) which provides National Guard units with a unique dual-service function within our military apparatus (Molina & Morse, 2015).

When National Guard students are not participating in domestic or international efforts, they are in training (drill) one weekend per month and two weeks per year for advanced training with their units (Hitt et al., 2015; Molina & Morse, 2015). Monthly or yearly drill requirements are not restricted to only weekend days, military drill and short-term activations can spill over into normal class days during the week which can cause academic difficulties or delays (Lunceford et al., 2020). According to Molina & Morse (2017), National Guard students are comprised of 33% female service members and 37% of racial/ethnic minorities; were 20 years old when they first started attending college; 56% went to college full-time; and 86% attended college in their state of residence. Research has shown that 32% of National Guard students have at least one dependent and 28% have taken all their classes online (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Active-Duty**

Active-duty service members are those who serve full-time in the military, the full-time workload is not confined to 40 hours a week (Molina & Morse, 2015). These service members can be stationed all over the world supporting our domestic and international interests. Service members who serve on active duty can serve in any of the five branches (Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Navy, or Marine Corps) of the military and tend to prefer classes that are either online or delivered on a military installation (Lunceford et al., 2020). According to Molina and Morse (2017), the active-duty force is comprised of 22% female members and 48% of racial/ethnic minorities; 61% went to school part-time; and only 45% went to college in their state of

residence. Research has also shown that 57% of active-duty service members have at least one dependent and 59% have taken all their classes online (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Student Veteran**

There are several definitions used to describe student veterans, for the purposes of this review, veterans are defined as anyone who has served in the military, is no longer active in any component of the military, and is attending college (Molina & Morse, 2015). Student veterans could have served either on active duty or in the National Guard and may have combat experience, but that is not guaranteed (Lunceford et al., 2020). According to Molina and Morse (2017), the student veteran population is comprised of 21% female veterans and 40% of racial/ethnic minorities; were 25 years old when they first started attending college; 51% went to college full-time; and 77% attended college in their state of residence. Research has also shown that 52% of student veterans have at least one dependent and 22% have taken all their classes online (Molina & Morse, 2015).

<div align="center">**Funding Differences for SSM/Vs**</div>

Since its inception in 1917, the draft was the primary means for ensuring proper troop levels for personnel needs and operational requirements (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). After the US participated in numerous military conflicts in the early and mid-20th century, the draft was ended in 1973 and the military transitioned to all-volunteer force (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Once the US ended the draft, focus shifted to ways to incentivize military service as a means to ensure proper troop levels once guaranteed by the draft. The US has invested heavily in military education benefits as the major incentive to entice participation in our all-volunteer force (Hitt et al., 2015). This should not be a surprise, because as far back as WWII, the military realized the

value of education as a resource to positively impact morale, retention, and professional

development (Loss, 2005).

As noted above, several differences exist between the SSM/V groups due to their varying

military obligations, personal obligations, and needs. There are just as many differences in what

Department of Defense (DoD) or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits are

available (Molina & Morse, 2015). Due to these variances, it is important to develop working

relationships that provide seamless financial aid and military benefits counseling to SSM/Vs

(Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Researchers have found that SSM/Vs often have benefits that

overlap and can use multiple benefits at one time, further complicating their need for correct

guidance on campus (Molina & Morse, 2015). An important element to understand is that

military benefits do not always cover the cost of college, this could affect SSM/Vs academically

(Arminio et al., 2015) and may force the use of federal financial aid to help cover additional

expenses (Molina & Morse, 2015).

**Breakdown of Benefits by SSM/V Group**

As mentioned above, there is significant variability and overlap with the military benefits

available to SSM/Vs. According to Molina & Morse (2015), National Guard students have

access to the following DoD or VA education benefits: Tuition Assistance, Post 9/11 GI Bill,

Montgomery GI Bill Selected Reserve, Reserve Educational Assistance Program, and Veterans

Readiness and Employment. Active-duty students have access to the following DoD or VA

education benefits: Tuition Assistance, Post 9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty, and

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Molina & Morse, 2015). Student veterans have

access to the following DoD or VA education benefits: Post 9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill

Active Duty, Veterans Educational Assistance Program, and Veterans Readiness and

Employment (Molina & Morse, 2015). A more detailed explanation of these benefits is warranted to show the complexity of the benefits available to SSM/Vs.

**Post 9/11 GI Bill**

This program is for service members who served on active-duty after September 10, 2001, and have an aggregate of 90 days of active-duty service (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). This GI Bill went into effect on August 1, 2009, and is available to service members currently serving or honorably discharged. This benefit provides up to 36 months of tuition and fee payments directly to the college, a monthly housing allowance to the student, and book and supply stipend to the student (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). Service members can transfer this benefit to a qualified dependent and have variable timeframes to use it within. If the service member left active-duty after January 1, 2013, there is no time limit to use the benefit, but if they left active-duty before that date they have 15 years from their date of discharge to use the benefit (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019).

**Montgomery GI Bill Active-Duty or Selected Reserve**

The active-duty portion of this program requires the service member to pay $100 a month for their first 12 months in active-duty service and the DoD funds this program for service members in the National Guard after June 30, 1985 (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). The service member can use the benefit for 36 months as long as they fulfill their service obligation and/or receive an honorable discharge. The service member has up to ten years after their active-duty discharge to use the benefit and National Guard can only use this when they are still serving (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). A unique aspect of this GI Bill is that the service member has to complete the equivalent of a secondary school diploma before they can apply for the benefit (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019).

**Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP)**

This program is available to service members who entered active-duty after December 31, 1976, and before July 1, 1985. To use VEAP, you must have contributed to it while on active-duty before April 1, 1987 (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). The service member could contribute a maximum of $2,700 and the government would match the contribution $2 for every $1 from the service member for a maximum benefit up to $8,100 (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). Any unused contribution from the service member could be refunded if not used for college. The benefit can be used up to 36 months and had to be used within ten years of discharge from the military (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019).

**Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP)**

This benefit was specifically authorized for members of the National Guard who served on active-duty after September 10, 2001, in support of an operation under federal authority for a minimum of 90 consecutive days (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). The DoD determines the eligibility for the program as it was scheduled to expire around November 25, 2019. If the service member still qualifies for the benefit, they can use it for up to 36 months while still serving in the National Guard (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019). This program paid out as a portion of the Montgomery GI Bill Active-Duty rate for three years of military service (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2019).

**Veterans Readiness and Employment (VRE)**

This benefit is available to veterans and select active service members who have received an honorable discharge or are in the process of being medically discharged from the military and have a disability rating with the VA of at least 10% (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-a). This program provides a variety of benefits to disabled veterans: on-the-job training or

apprenticeships, professional or vocational counseling, evaluation of skills and interests, rehabilitative services, and employment services while in college (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-a). This program pays tuition and fees directly to the college, a monthly housing allowance to the student, and book and supply costs to the college. If the service member was discharged before January 1, 2013, they can use the benefit up to 12 years after they were discharged or received their disability rating with the VA. If the service member was discharged after January 1, 2013, they have no time limit to use this program (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-a).

**Federal Tuition Assistance (TA)**

Tuition assistance is offered to current service members in each branch of the military and is funded by the DoD. This assistance is for voluntary off-duty education programs that support personal and professional development goals (Defense Activity for Non-traditional Education Support, n.d.). The service member qualifies for up to $250 per credit hour in tuition funding with an annual cap of $4,500 per fiscal year (Defense Activity for Non-traditional Education Support, n.d.). Each branch of the military can develop their own criteria for qualification to use TA and have their own dedicated education counseling staff to assist service members. TA can only be used at DoD approved colleges and universities who have an approved Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on file with the DoD (Defense Activity for Non-traditional Education Support, n.d.).

## Supporting SSM/Vs in Higher Education

The GI Bill has provided increased access to post-secondary education for SSM/Vs and forced a renewed focus on how colleges can effectively support SSM/Vs while on campus (Kirchner, 2015). Current SSM/Vs have unique needs that should be identified and addressed by

administrators to ensure their success in college (Bondi et al., 2020; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Colleges are using risk factors to identify students who are struggling academically and using that data to provide structured interventions to improve the chances of increased persistence, GPAs, and graduation rates (Kuh et al., 2006). It is also important to evaluate the impact of campus policies on the academic success of SSM/Vs (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) as those policies must supplement efforts to support SSM/Vs who are struggling academically.

As of 2016, SSM/Vs comprised about 4% of undergraduate students nationwide and institutions have developed programs and policies to support their academic success (Bondi et al., 2020). SSM/Vs are a difficult group to support within postsecondary education as they often exist as invisible members of the campus community; due to their maturity, humility, and pride (Livingston et al., 2011). This is important to address, because SSM/Vs are less likely to use support services (Livingston et al., 2011) and will seek out off campus support networks for assistance (Jones, 2020). Since not all colleges provide the same level of support (Bondi et al., 2020), it is imperative that colleges provide this information proactively to ensure access to needed services (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Colleges must first decide how to set up their campus support services, and this can be accomplished through several different approaches. First, campus can provide a one-stop model that houses all support services for military-connected students in one department (Hitt et al., 2015). Second, campus can use a first-stop model that directs students to a point of contact who answers basic military-related questions and then refers additional questions to appropriate champions in other departments (Hitt et al., 2015). Third, campus can create a military-specific orientation that SSM/Vs can participate in that provides all relevant on-boarding information before classes begin (Hitt et al., 2015). Fourth, campus can create a working group of military

advocates that communicate with students when needs arise (Hitt et al., 2015). These approaches are useful because each college can use one or multiple of these approaches to best support their SSM/Vs depending on their funding and infrastructure.

When colleges decide on the type of support system to utilize, then the discussion turns to what programming and practices impact academic success. Common resources provided either in a centralized (one main office) or decentralized (in various offices around campus) model are academic advising (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020; Arminio et al., 2015), tutoring (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020; Molina & Ang, 2017), disability services (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020; Arminio et al., 2015), and financial aid assistance (Molina & Ang, 2017; Arminio et al., 2015). Effective academic advising for SSM/Vs ensures timely progression through degree programs (Arminio et al., 2015), access to tutoring ensures successful remediation of academic deficiencies (Molina & Ang, 2017), and connection to disability services ensures access to useful classroom accommodations and academic support (Arminio et al., 2015).

**Factors Impacting Academic Success**

SSM/Vs face several barriers to college success due to their military service or lack of understanding by campus administrators (Arminio et al., 2015). The main academic factors that impact college success for SSM/Vs are struggling with reintegrating back into society after the military (Arminio et al., 2015), overcoming service-connected disabilities (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020), learning to live with mental health conditions associated with service (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020), and juggling multiple life priorities outside of college (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Service-connected disabilities and mental health conditions are barriers to academic success gained during military service and require careful consideration when employing strategies for adjusting to college life (Minnis & Kirchner, 2020). SSM/Vs have outside work and family obligations

which causes low GPA's and a decreased sense of belonging on campus (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Research has also shown that SSM/Vs suffer academically because of the unstructured nature of higher education, compared to that of the military (Bondi et al., 2020). The transition from the very structured military environment can be challenging academically if they are not familiar with the independent nature of college classes (Livingston et al., 2011).

The main social factors that impact academic success for SSM/Vs are interactions with faculty and SSM/V peers. The social interactions on campus with both faculty and peers are very important to National Guard students specifically (Livingston et al., 2011; Bauman, 2009). Conflicts with peers or faculty members can have a negative impact on the willingness of National Guard students to try and connect on campus (Barry et al., 2014) and contribute to lower reported sense of belonging on campus (Vest et al., 2020). According to Barry et al (2014), SSM/Vs tend to have more difficulty connecting with their civilian peers, so they prefer connecting with other SSM/V peers for academic and social support. Many colleges have military student clubs for this reason, which are supported by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) national organization (Bondi et al., 2020).

There are also personal factors that impact academic success for SSM/Vs. First, they have difficulties adjusting to new, multiple identities on campus which makes it difficult to act like civilian peers in class (Arminio et al., 2015). They are simultaneously making sense of their military experiences, which could include combat experience, and how that informs their new identities on campus (Bondi et al., 2020). Second, many SSM/Vs are fighting validation issues tied to past experiences of anxiety and fear around school and education (Bondi et al., 2020). Third, SSM/Vs often enter the military as an alternative option to college, because they either do

not believe they belong in college or have been told by someone in the past (academic invalidation) that they would not be successful in college (Bondi et al., 2020).

**Institutional Policies and Practices Impacting Academic Success**

General institutional policies and practices that impact the academic success of SSM/Vs prior to the start of their college experience are transcript review processes, military orientations, priority registration, and pre-enrollment advising (Molina & Ang, 2017). One of the biggest obstacles to academic success that SSM/Vs face is during the onboarding process at college. Most colleges have inconsistent methods for assigning credit for military service, credit for credit earned within the military, and applying military credit to degree programs (Arminio et al., 2015). Another critical component of successfully onboarding SSM/Vs is the use of institutional orientations tailored for SSM/Vs. These orientations help build inclusion among SSM/Vs and provide access to all resources available on campus (Molina & Ang, 2017). Priority registration allows for SSM/Vs to enroll in required classes earlier than their peers which ensures timely degree completion (Arminio et al., 2015).

Institutional policies and practices that impact the academic success of SSM/Vs during their college experience are financial aid and military benefits counseling, use of disability services, academic support, career exploration, and housing assistance (Arminio et al., 2015). Proactive financial aid and military benefits support is critical due to the complexity of military benefits (Molina & Morse, 2015), lack of understanding on how federal financial aid works (Molina & Ang, 2017), and the fact that military benefits do not cover the entire cost of a college degree (Arminio et al., 2015). SSM/Vs with disabilities often do not seek help through campus disability services, which makes it very important for those offices to proactively reach out and communicate the purpose, availability, and benefits of using their services (Arminio et al., 2015).

Colleges can also positively impact SSM/Vs by connecting them with tutoring and supplemental instruction, career development activities, and housing suitable for older students (Arminio et al., 2015).

SSM/Vs have identified institutional policies and practices regarding re-enrollment as a major individual hurdle to overcome to finish college (Livingston et al., 2011). Campus policies regarding leaving and re-enrolling on campus after a mobilization or deployment are important for National Guard students to ensure they are not prohibited from finishing their degrees (Livingston et al., 2011; Bauman, 2009). This is crucial because the gaps in educational experiences caused by deployments or mobilizations adversely affect academic progress and achievement (Barry et al., 2014). National Guard students are at greater risks for financial penalties or credit for work completed prior to leaving for a deployment or mobilization. According to Hitt et al. (2015), instructors can aid National Guard students in these situations by looking at creative solutions to finishing course requirements, offering realistic extensions, and extending incomplete periods.

## Completion and Persistence in Higher Education

University administrators across the country are concerned with the completion and persistence rates of enrolled students (Lang & O'Donnell, 2017). Public universities that are reliant on tuition revenue are especially concerned with these rates as it affects the financial stability of the institution overall. Persistence rates are defined as the amount of first-time undergraduate students who return to the same school in the following Fall semester (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Graduation rates measure the amount of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who complete their degree at the same university within a specific period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The persistence rate for public

universities between 2019 and 2020 was 82% and the graduation rate within six years for the 2014 cohort at public universities was 63% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

## Completion and Persistence of SSM/Vs

Due to the significant investment in military education benefits over the last 70 years, there has been interest from the federal government to see the impact of that investment on SSM/Vs. Research into the academic outcomes of the GI Bill found that approximately eight million SSM/Vs used the WWII GI bill to complete a degree or certificate and for the two million SSM/Vs using the Korean War GI Bill increased their time to degree by one academic term and graduation rates by five or six points (Cate, 2017). In 1973, the Educational Testing Service found that the GI Bill had a profound impact on the education levels of SSM/Vs by cutting the amount of SSM/Vs without a high school diploma from 54.6% to 20.2%. That same study found that the percentage of SSM/Vs between the ages of 25 and 29 with four or more years of college nearly tripled from 11% to 31.7% (Cate, 2017).

Research on the academic outcomes of SSM/Vs faded between 1973 and 2010, until the VA conducted the National Survey of Veterans in 2010 (Cate, 2017). This survey asked SSM/Vs using military education benefits if they completed their degree or certificate and found that 63% reported the degree or certificate completion. Further analysis of that survey showed a stable completion rate between 66% and 68% for the period between the Korean War and September 11, 2001 (Cate, 2017). What this survey did not do is provide data on academic outcomes for current SSM/Vs using education benefits. The need for this type of data led to the Million Records Project (MRP), which was a partnership between the VA, National Student Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse), and the Student Veterans of America (SVA; Cate, 2017).

The MRP pulled from student outcome data provided to the Clearinghouse by participating higher education institutions, providing near real-time data on student outcomes for SSM/Vs in the Post 9/11 era (Cate, 2017). The MRP evaluated a national sample of GI Bill benefit users from 2002-2010, this sample included SSM/Vs who used the Montgomery GI Bill as data was not yet available on the Post 9/11 GI Bill that started in August 2009. The MRP found that 59.4% of SSM/Vs completed their bachelor's degree within six years and 52.6% completed their associate degree within four years (Cate, 2017). The MRP research helped address gaps in SSM/V research data, but also created more questions around SSM/V academic progress, enrollment interruptions, and why they withdraw from college. The National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) was created to provide data on SSM/V persistence, transfer, and attrition rates (Cate, 2017).

The NVEST project was a collaboration between the VA, Clearinghouse, Lumina Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and Google. The NVEST project looked at SSM/Vs using the Post 9/11 GI Bill between August 2009 and December 2013 to more accurately demonstrate the academic success of current SSM/Vs (Cate et al, 2017). The NVEST project added data on SSM/V persistence, transfer, and attrition rates in addition to the completion rates, degree fields, and degree levels (Cate et al., 2017). According to Cate et al. (2017), completion was defined as the degree or certificate was completed during the research time frame, persistence was defined as the student did not complete the degree or certificate but registered in the next semester outside of the sample, and attrition was defined as the student did not complete the degree or certificate and did not register in the next semester outside of the sample. The NVEST project found that 53.6% of SSM/Vs completed their degree or certificate and 18% of SSM/Vs persisted into the next semester (Cate et al., 2017).

The NVEST project found a 28.4% attrition rate for SSM/Vs, which means they did not complete their degree or certificate in the sample time frame and did not register the next semester after the sample (Cate et al., 2017). Of the SSM/Vs in the attrition category, 19.8% completed the last semester in the sample time frame and 8.6% withdrew, dropped out, or failed to re-enroll in the last semester. According to Cate et al. (2017), one possible explanation for high attrition rate is the number of Reservists and National Guard students in the sample who were activated in the middle of semester and required to withdraw due to military service. According to the NVEST project, 58.6% of Reservists and National Guard had at least one withdrawal during the sample time frame, but more research is needed to determine if that is a main cause of attrition (Cate et al., 2017).

**Academic Disruptions of National Guard Students**

Colleges enroll National Guard students that concurrently undertake full-time study and part-time military service and can be activated to military service multiple times during their academic careers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). When National Guard students are activated for service, they are often waiting around for orders notifying them when they are to leave (Bauman, 2009). This is the pre-mobilization phase of the military mobilization process when National Guard students are trying to figure out how to best proceed with their education and careers. The next phase is the separation phase and National Guard students tend to separate from their educational institutions first as they prepare to deploy or mobilize (Bauman, 2009). The final phase is the return phase when National Guard students come back to their civilian lives and reintegrate back into their educational institutions (Bauman, 2009).

Deployments or mobilizations for SSM/Vs are similar to the process a civilian student experiences when they stop out. Stopping out, or academic disruption, occurs when students do

not complete their plan of study within the normal period due to skipping one or more semesters (Bauman, 2009). A federal study conducted in the mid 2000s found that 80% of colleges enrolled students who withdrew due to military service and only two-thirds of those colleges had implemented policies that refunded tuition or limited academic penalties (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). A crucial area to address regarding academic disruption, is the college re-enrollment process for returning National Guard students (Bauman, 2009). According to Livingston et al. (2011), returning National Guard students view the re-enrollment process as an individual hurdle and not something the college should plan for proactively.

Withdrawal and re-admission policies should accommodate National Guard students who are continually activated for military service during their studies to ensure seamless re-enrollment (Arminio et al., 2015). Resources will vary by institution depending on the support structure available but should not hinder development of common-sense re-enrollment policies and practices. When National Guard students mobilize, they should be tracked either in the admissions or veterans support office to ensure they be re-admitted easily upon return (Arminio et al., 2015). Bauman (2009) suggests developing formal return processes and orientations to assist National Guard students with getting back into the college, activating their funding sources, and connecting with campus advocates. Institutions can also develop strategic community partnerships on and off campus to provide timely assistance and referrals for services not provided by campus (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

## Theoretical Framework

Bauman (2009) identified three phases of mobilization that National Guard students experience when leaving and returning to college after a military obligation: the pre-mobilization phase, separation phase, and return phase. The uniqueness of a National Guard mobilization is in

how unpredictable it can be due to not knowing when it will start and how long it will last. It is common for National Guard students to stop their academic pursuits for two or more academic semesters without an idea of when they will return (Bauman, 2009). Military mobilizations greatly impact the ability of National Guard students to attend college.

Due to the unpredictability of National Guard mobilizations, it is important to understand how best to support these students through the phases of mobilization. A helpful lens to view this issue through is validation theory, coined by Laura Rendón in 1994 as an intentional, proactive affirmation of non-traditional students by in and out of class agents (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Rendón identified agents as faculty, academic and student affairs staff, family members, and peers who validated non-traditional students as creators of knowledge and valuable members of the learning community and fostered personal development and social adjustment (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Agents are the individuals with the most opportunity to positively impact the success of a National Guard student who is going through the three phases of mobilization.

National Guard students tend to doubt their ability to finish classes successfully when they leave unexpectedly and are unsure how they will re-integrate back into college life when they return (Bauman, 2009). Providing validating experiences to these non-traditional students will help to overcome their existing anxieties, fears, and prior invalidation experiences (Bondi et al., 2020). Validation theory sets out to explain how non-traditional students can find success in college if they found it difficult to get involved, been invalidated in the past, or had doubts about their ability to succeed in college (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). According to Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011), non-traditional students experienced belief in their ability to succeed

in college when they were validated by in and out of class agents. This was the first time many of these students felt cared for and that their life experiences were valued.

Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011) identified validation as a process that has six central elements. First, the responsibility for initiating contact with non-traditional students is on institutional agents such as faculty, advisors, counselors, and coaches. Non-traditional students find it difficult to navigate college campuses by themselves and are unlikely to use campus resources because they are working off campus or feel uncomfortable asking questions. It is critical for institutional agents to reach out proactively to non-traditional students instead of expecting them to reach out with questions or concerns (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Second, when validation is present non-traditional students will feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth. Whomever the student turns to for validation will confirm to them that they bring knowledge to college and have the potential to succeed (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Third, validation is a prerequisite for student development. When non-traditional students are validated on a consistent basis, they will feel confident about their ability to learn and get involved in college life (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Fourth, validation can occur inside and outside of the classroom. Fifth, validation is a developmental process that begins early and occurs over time. When a non-traditional student experience validating experiences throughout their time in college, they will enjoy a richer college experience (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Finally, validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience especially during the first few weeks of the first year of college (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Many non-traditional students attend college needing a sense of direction and guidance to succeed, they often fail in the invalidating and fiercely competitive learning environments that exist in most college classrooms (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 20110. It is important to identify which experiences are validating and invalidating to non-traditional students to measure their impact on National Guard students. Examples of validating experiences include faculty providing opportunities for students to witness themselves as successful learners, ensuring the curriculum reflects the backgrounds of the students, faculty sharing knowledge and ensuring that students become partners in the learning, coaches taking time with students to plan courses and their futures, parents/spouses/children supporting the student while working towards their degree, and faculty taking time to get to know students outside of class (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Examples of invalidating experiences include withholding information, instilling fear and doubt, faculty and staff distancing themselves from students, viewing certain kinds of students as incapable of learning in college, and creating competitive environments that pit students against each other (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

## Conclusion

This chapter discussed the historical relationship between higher education and the military; from military training units on campus like ROTC to the significant financial investment in college funding for SSM/Vs with the GI Bill. It covered the differences between each group of students in the SSM/V population and how educational funding is impacted by military status. This chapter also discussed the factors and policies within higher education that affect the success of SSM/Vs in college. It discussed the definitions of completion and persistence in higher education and how SSM/Vs compared with the college population. This chapter also detailed how common academic disruptions are for National Guard students and the

importance of tracking those students and making their re-enrollment into college as easy as possible.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This case study explored the effectiveness of re-enrollment policies and procedures for National Guard students after an academic disruption at a small RPU in the South. Academic disruptions are common for National Guard students, so it is important to determine if the current re-enrollment policies and procedures at the RPU produced their intended outcomes. This chapter will identify the research design, research questions, and participants identified for this study. It will also discuss the interview protocol used with the participants and how data will be collected and analyzed. The chapter concludes with a discussion around the trustworthiness of the study.

## Epistemology

For this study, I approached the problem from a social constructivist perspective that has guided the development of the research design. Social constructivism posits that people seek understanding of the world and develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). As discussed earlier, National Guard students experience college differently than traditional students and their SSM/V counterparts. The meanings made from their experiences will be varied and that is why it is important to examine the complexity of the issue of academic disruptions based off a variety of perspectives. I identified trends within their experiences with re-enrollment after an academic disruption based off those perspectives (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

### Positionality

I currently work within an office that supports SSM/Vs in a higher education setting and have long wondered if we are adequately supporting our National Guard students. I can relate to these students in some ways because I too served in the military, but I have a difficult time

completely relating because I served on active duty. I also attended college while I served and

after I left the military, but my needs were very different in both cases compared to what I have

experienced with the National Guard students I work with. In my professional roles supporting

SSM/Vs, I have developed programming and support collaborations based off my personal

experiences in college as an active duty service member and student veteran.

Offices that support SSM/Vs in higher education also tend to get more engagement from

white male student veterans than any other population. I also relate better to that population

seeing as I am a white male veteran that utilized the SSM/V support office while I was in

college. There is great diversity in the SSM/V population regarding both sex and race and that

has held true with the National Guard students that I have worked with. I selected the case study

method that allows the National Guard students and staff members that I interviewed to inform

me of what they are experiencing and what is the best way to support them through academic

disruptions. This will help to reduce the amount of bias or misunderstanding built into the

research design based on my own experiences.

<center>**Research Design**</center>

I chose a qualitative study for this research as it provided ample room to explore the issue

of academic disruptions of National Guard students. Qualitative research works well with my

social constructivist lens as it is devoted to making meaning out of human experiences within

their specific contexts (Bhattacharya, 2017). I have anecdotal information regarding how

academic disruptions affect a National Guard student's ability to re-enroll in college. Qualitative

research approaches are useful because I am unsure of the specific ways academic disruptions

affect National Guard students' academic careers and not much research has been done broadly

on National Guard students (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). A qualitative design will allow me to

ask open-ended questions of National Guard students experiences, gain insights of their experiences with re-enrollment after an academic disruption, and identify trends based off those experiences (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

## Research Questions

This case study explored several avenues to explain how military mobilizations affect the academic lives of National Guard students. Specifically, it gathered relevant information regarding how academic disruptions impacted National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college. The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do National Guard students describe their experiences of re-entry into college after an academic disruption?

2. How do academic disruptions due to military service affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college?

3. How do administrators perceive the impact of institutional policies and procedures on their ability to help National Guard students re-enroll in college after an academic disruption?

## Methodology

Yin (2018) describes the five social science research methods: experiments, surveys, archival analyses, histories, and case studies. Determining which method to use is guided by the type of research questions, control over behavioral events, and focus on contemporary or historical events. What questions tend to develop hypotheses or propositions for further inquiry, who and where questions tend to describe the prevalence of a phenomenon or track outcomes, and how and why questions tend to deal with the tracing of operational processes over time (Yin, 2018). Another item of concern is whether the researcher needs to control behaviors of

participants to conduct the research, the only method that requires that is an experiment. Lastly, the researcher needs to determine whether they are concerned with contemporary or historical events. Historical events tend to deal with phenomenon where direct observations are not possible and no living participants are available to be interviewed (Yin, 2018).

I selected case study as the methodology for this study because it satisfied the following criteria: interested in how questions that traced processes over time, control over behavioral events was not needed, and focused on contemporary events. According to Yin (2018), case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a specific case and gain a real-world, holistic perspective of the phenomenon. As stated above, a good amount of anecdotal information exists as to how academic disruptions affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college, but what is lacking is a holistic understanding of how the phases of mobilization and current university policies impact re-enrollment. The strength of the case study approach is it allows the researcher to use a variety of evidence to better understand the phenomenon, such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations (Yin, 2018).

## Research Methods

In this section, I discuss the methods used to conduct this case study. First, there is a breakdown of the types of participants sought out for this study, why they were important to the study, and how they were selected. Second, I identify the research setting and described the environment the study took place in. Third, I identify the types of evidence used for this study and how participants were recruited. Fourth, I discuss how I analyzed and coded the data and compared those themes to current re-enrollment policies. Lastly, I address potential concerns and threats to the study and how I ensured the quality of data analysis relative to those concerns and threats.

**Participants**

According to the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) project, it was theorized that one of the main causes of attrition for National Guard students was having at least one withdrawal due to military service (Cate et al., 2017). The authors of that study expressed the need for more research on this topic to determine if withdrawal due to military service affects attrition. This study is an extension of the NVEST study and evaluated whether academic disruptions impacted National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college after the disruption. I interviewed current National Guard students who are in an undergraduate degree program, at least 19 years of age, and have experienced at least one semester of academic disruption due to a military mobilization. The students must have withdrawn from a full semester due to mobilizations and will not be selected to participate if they withdrew for personal or financial reasons. I also interviewed current staff members who directly support National Guard students during the academic disruptions for their perspectives on college policies and procedures designed to get National Guard students back in college.

**Research Setting and Environment**

Researchers have started to focus their efforts on rural Regional Public Universities (RPUs) due to their impact on their local communities. Research has specifically looked at rural RPUs in Appalachia as they face higher rates of poverty than the rest of the United States and bachelor's degree attainment is 76.8% of the national average (Hallmark & Knight, 2021). Only 22 of 420 Appalachian counties had working adults with at least a bachelor's degree that matched national averages and in 29 counties the percentage of adults with at least a bachelor's degree is less than 10% (Hallmark & Knight, 2021). This data calls attention to questions about access to and graduation from RPUs in the Appalachian region. The Appalachian Regional

Commission (ARC) defines the boundaries of Appalachia to include portions of: West Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (Hallmark & Knight, 2021).

Jacksonville State University (JSU) is a RPU in the Appalachian foothills in northeast Alabama about 15 miles from Fort McClellan, the state's Army National Guard Training Center. The northeast part of Alabama is mostly rural and JSU has evolved into the educational center for the surrounding counties in that part of the state (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-b). JSU started out as a normal school back in 1883, transitioned into a teachers' college in 1930, and eventually earned university status back in 1966 (JSU, n.d.-c). According to the 2022 Fact Book (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-a), JSU enrolled 8,311 undergraduate and 1,322 doctoral or graduate students for a total Fall 22 enrollment of 9,633. JSU offers 101 academic programs and concentrations, including Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral, and certificate programs (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-c). According to the 2022 Fact Book (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-a), most students earn degrees in nursing, education, and business as those lead directly into jobs in the local economy.

Prior to 2016, JSU did not offer any specific support services to SSM/Vs; there was support for military education benefits within the financial aid office, but no additional programming or support was available. That changed in the Fall of 2015, when the university was awarded a $330K grant from the US Department of Education to provide support services for student veterans (Jacksonville State University, 2015). The award of this grant was monumental for JSU, as it was the culmination of two years of research, data collection, and planning to provide specific support services for SSM/Vs (Jacksonville State University, 2015). The three-year grant provided funds to hire three new full-time staff members to focus on

developing support, engagement, and career opportunities. JSU completely funded this support

office at the end of the grant in 2019 and currently has four support personnel assigned to work

with SSM/Vs (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-d).

According to the GI Bill Comparison Tool, JSU currently serves 462 students using some

form of VA education benefit (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.-b). Out of those 462

students, 125 are currently serving in the National Guard and could be negatively impacted by

academic disruptions (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-a). Many of the RPUs in the

Appalachian region serve National Guard students from their communities that are low-income,

first-generation students that have limited access to higher education. This is a population that

could greatly impact the bachelor's degree attainment numbers in the rural communities

throughout the Appalachian region. By examining the experiences of National Guard students

against re-enrollment policies and procedures at JSU, I can develop recommendations for best

practices at other RPUs in the Appalachian region.

**Data Collection**

Yin (2018) identified six sources of evidence for case study research: interviews, direct

observations, participant-observations, documentation, archival records, and physical artifacts.

The first source of evidence used for this study was interviews conducted with current National

Guard students and staff members using semi-structured, open-ended questions (Appendix A and

C respectively) to better understand students' experiences, gain insights into current JSU policies

and procedures impacting re-enrollment after an academic disruption, and identify trends based

off those experiences (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). I solicited participation in the research by

email correspondence (Appendix B and D respectively) with students and staff members who fit

the research parameters. I identified students by pulling data from the university's student data

system to get a list of students who are currently in the National Guard and have withdrawn from at least one semester while at the university. I identified staff members most likely to support National Guard students during the phases of mobilization (Bauman, 2009) and re-entry into college after the academic disruption. I interviewed a total of three National Guard students, five staff members, and the interviews took around 45 minutes to complete.

The second source of evidence used for this study was a review of pertinent documentary evidence produced by JSU. Yin (2018) identified several types of documentation that can be used for case study research: emails, memos, administrative documents, agendas, formal evaluations, and news clippings or other mass media. For this study, I reviewed university catalogs, admissions websites, and military support office websites for information relevant to National Guard students leaving and re-enrolling at JSU. I used the trends gathered from the interviews with National Guard students and staff members and compared that to current re-enrollment policies and procedures at JSU to see if those policies and procedures are helping National Guard students re-enroll after the disruption.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

For this study, I identified Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the best option to analyze the research data. IPA allows the researcher to focus on the lived experiences of the participants and examine how they make meaning out of their major life experiences (Alase, 2017) and provides a space for rich and detailed case-by-case analysis of the participants' experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This approach worked well with the case study because it allowed me to explore the experiences of a contemporary phenomenon with the case-by-case analysis of participant experiences with JSU policies and procedures. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the IPA methodology utilizes a three-phase approach to analyzing

data. The first phase is focused on identifying observations and distinctive phrases of the interviews. The second phase is focused on identifying emerging themes from the participant's experiences. The third phase is focused on clustering similar themes under one unifying label.

I conducted the interviews virtually over Microsoft Teams to ensure that I caught all relevant details. At the end of the interviews, I used the transcript feature of Microsoft Teams to obtain the interview's initial transcription. Next, I watched the interview over again to clean up the transcription of the interview and produce a final, accurate transcript of the interview. Within the first phase of analysis, I watched the interview and read through the transcripts several times (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) to pull out main observations and distinct phrases or jargon used by the participant. Within the second phase, I looked through my phase one notes and transformed those into higher level conceptualizations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) that represent emerging themes of the interview. Within the third phase, I started to group themes together based on conceptual similarities (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and applied a label to those groupings or clusters that tie the concepts together.

At the end of the analysis, I had two conceptual clusters with several emerging themes within. I compared those conceptual clusters against current JSU policies and procedures regarding re-enrollment of National Guard students: the military withdrawal process, readmission process, and tracking of mobilized students. I identified policies and procedures because they have a direct impact on each phase of mobilization and are most likely to impact National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after the disruption. I was interested in whether the National Guard students were validated during each phase of mobilization, staff members felt empowered to support National Guard students during mobilizations, and university policies and procedures encouraged National Guard students to re-enroll in college after a disruption.  This

comparison helped to evaluate JSU's current policies and procedures and make recommendations to improve their impact on re-enrollment after the disruption.

The two clusters identified by both National Guard students and staff members were support and communication. Each group of participants expressed the importance of support and communication to their ability to either survive the disruption or empower students to return after it. For National Guard students, support was needed from campus and off campus agents to survive the mobilization and be motivated to return to college. Communication from the college was important to remind them of important deadlines and regulations regarding their funding sources. For staff members, support was needed from the military support office and other officials to know what withdrawal options existed and their impact on students' ability to return to college. Communication was important for staff members to engage students while they were mobilized and get them pertinent information on how to return to college afterwards.

**Trustworthiness**

Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) identified several validity procedures that ensures the accuracy of the research findings: triangulation, member checking, rich description, clarifying bias, peer debriefing, prolonged time in the field, present discrepancies, and external auditor. The first validity procedure used for this study was triangulation. Case studies by their nature address triangulation because they require the evaluation of several sources of information to effectively research the case. The use of several sources of data or perspectives from the participants helps to build a coherent justification for the emerging themes (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). To perform an in-depth study of a phenomenon in its real-world context, the basis for a case study, you need to use multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018).

The second validity procedure used for this study was clarifying the bias of the researcher. I have a lot of direct experience working with National Guard students on campus, but I am still perplexed with how to adequately support their academic journey during academic disruptions. The difficulty of supporting National Guard students during academic disruptions is directly tied to the performance of my office; the lack of success in this area reflects negatively on our professional work. In the past I was a student veteran on campus and my experiences were very different compared with National Guard students. I understand some of their struggles but did not have to navigate mobilizations while I was in college. I lack their perspectives and insights into how a university can make them feel validated and supported during those difficult times.

The third validity procedure used for this study was prolonged time in the field. Prolonged time in the field allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the issue studied, the research site, and the people involved in the phenomenon (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). I have worked with military-connected students for over ten years at a variety of colleges (the last eight years at JSU) and have an intimate knowledge of the National Guard students and staff members involved and the policies and procedures that govern re-enrollment after an academic disruption. My experience with this population expands beyond this research study, it includes more conversations about mobilizations with students, faculty, and staff than I can remember. The depth of institutional knowledge allows me to convey details about the research site that lends credibility to the study (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). My knowledge and relationships with the research site and participants improved the accuracy of the findings of this study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the design of the research study and how my epistemology and positionality are situated within it. It discussed why a case study methodology was chosen for the study and how it provides real-world context to a problem that I have a lot of anecdotal knowledge of. It also discussed how I will identify and recruit students for the study with an emphasis on students who have experienced academic disruptions due to military mobilizations. The chapter identified the two sources of evidence used for the study: interviews with National Guard students and staff members and review of documentary evidence provided by JSU. The study used the IPA approach to code and analyze interview data and compare those emerging themes with the current JSU re-enrollment policies and procedures of the military withdrawal process, the readmission process, and tracking of mobilized students. The chapter also discussed how triangulation, clarifying research bias, and prolonged time in the field were used to ensure the validity of the study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter addresses the current study's findings related to National Guard students and academic disruptions. That process starts with a discussion about the organization of the study's findings to include insights into differences emerging from the data and whether it supports the research questions. Second, a review of the methodology used for the study. Third, a description of the study subjects, the source of the subject pool, the selection process, number of subjects interviewed, and the criteria used for selection. Finally, a description of the research findings and their impact on the research questions.

## Organization of the Study's Findings

As part of this case study analysis, I interviewed current National Guard students and staff members who support them during periods of academic disruption. I started by describing the students and staff members interviewed and how they were selected for this study. Similarities and differences emerged from the experiences of students going through and staff members supporting during the academic disruption. I used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis IPA) method to code and analyze the interviews, which allowed me to identify themes and overarching labels that I could attach to the experiences of students and staff members. After analyzing all the interviews, the same overarching labels appeared for both interview groups: support and communication.

The next step was to identify the policies and procedures that I wanted to evaluate as part of this study. I was interested in the policies and procedures that had the most impact on each phase of mobilization that National Guard students experienced. I selected the military withdrawal process, tracking of mobilized students, and readmission process as the college criteria to be evaluated. I evaluated Jacksonville State University's (JSU) undergraduate catalog

and relevant websites for those criteria to gain a better understanding of their implications. I then compared those criteria to the themes gathered during the interviews to see if the university is set up to maximize the re-enrollment opportunities for National Guard students.

## Methodology Summary

According to Yin (2018), case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a specific case and gain a real-world, holistic perspective of the phenomenon. I have a good amount of anecdotal information on how academic disruptions affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college, but what is lacking is a holistic understanding of how the phases of mobilization and current university policies and procedures impact re-enrollment in college. The case study approach's strength is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of evidence to better understand the phenomenon, such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations (Yin, 2018). I interviewed current National Guard students and staff members using semi-structured, open-ended questions to better understand their experiences during the phases of mobilizations, gain insights into the importance of on and off campus agents during the academic disruption, and identify trends that impact National Guard students' college outcomes (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). I interviewed each student and staff member virtually in Microsoft Teams to have both audio and transcript data for analysis.

I utilized the IPA approach to analyze the interviews as it provided a space for rich and detailed case-by-case analysis of the participants' experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The IPA methodology utilizes a three-phase approach to analyzing data. The first phase is focused on identifying observations and distinctive phrases of the interviews. The second phase is focused on identifying emerging themes from the participant's experiences. The third phase is focused on clustering similar themes under one unifying label (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I compared

those conceptual clusters against current JSU policy and procedures: the military withdrawal process, readmission process, and tracking of mobilized students. These policies have a direct impact on each phase of mobilization and National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after the disruption.

## Population, Sample, and Participants

### Student Participants

To identify potential National Guard student participants, I obtained a list of all current students using a National Guard scholarship at JSU. I also obtained a list of all National Guard students who withdrew from at least one semester at JSU between 2018 and 2023. I emailed students who appeared on those lists with the research solicitation and got several responses. A few students had to withdraw from a semester for basic training or yearly training, I did not select those to interview because they did not meet the criteria of withdrawing due to a military mobilization. Three students volunteered for the study and met the criteria of withdrawing from at least one semester due to a military mobilization. Two of the selected students withdrew at another institution and one withdrew while attending JSU. I utilized pseudonyms for the student participants to protect their identities.

**Table 1**

*Student Participants*

| Name | Ethnicity | Gender | Age | Type of Degree | Served during Disruption |
|------|-----------|--------|-----|----------------|--------------------------|
| Sam | Mixed | Female | 23 | Undergrad | Yes |
| April | White | Female | 25 | Undergrad | Yes |
| Jake | White | Male | 33 | Undergrad | Yes |

*Sam*

Sam is a current member of the Air National Guard, and she entered the military right after graduating high school. When she told her family that she wanted to join the military they were unhappy with her decision, her father served in the Marines and wanted a different life for his daughter. Sam was living in the campus dorms when the Covid-19 pandemic closed everything in her state. Simultaneously she received orders from her unit to mobilize in support of the pandemic and was asked to move out of her dorm indefinitely due to Covid-19 restrictions. Sam mobilized within her state for four months to provide direct Covid-19 support in the state capital. She had access to both the internet and phone calls during her mobilization.

*April*

April is a former member of the National Guard who recently separated from the National Guard after serving six years. She entered the military right after graduating high school and her family fully supported her serving in the military. April comes from a family full of veterans and they value and encourage young adults to serve their state and country. When she mobilized, April got a phone call from her unit to attend an emergency meeting that ultimately led to her receiving orders to mobilize in support of security efforts at the Capital after the January 6th riots. She spent several weeks at the Capital in support of security efforts and slept on the floor of parking garages and did not have access to the internet. April was married with small children and had to rely heavily on family to support her while she was away.

*Jake*

Jake is a current member of the National Guard, and he entered the military right after graduating high school. Jake also came from a family full of veterans that fully supported his decision to serve in the military. One day Jake received unexpected orders to mobilize overseas

to support a unit he was not assigned to. He had to navigate the fears of danger in a deployed zone while trying to stay engaged with his college classes. Jake spent one year overseas mobilized to that deployed location and had to navigate a difficult transition back to civilian life when he returned home. He did have access to the internet and phone calls while mobilized.

**Staff Member Participants**

To identify potential staff member participants, I considered support offices on campus that worked directly with National Guard students during their academic disruptions. That included the following offices: military support, registrar's, admissions, financial aid, student accounts, academic advising, dean of students, and residence life. This was important, as these staff members would have the most relevant information regarding how university policies and procedures impacted students. I settled on interviewing one staff member from the campus military support office, one staff member from the office of admissions, and three academic advisors from majors that supported a lot of our National Guard students. These offices were selected because they had the most direct impact on the three phases of mobilization that are the basis of this study.

The staff member from the military support office was selected because they worked directly with National Guard students regarding military funding and general college advising. The staff member from admissions was selected because they worked exclusively with non-traditional students and adult learners. The advisors were identified by obtaining a current list of National Guard students by major and reaching out to the advisors from the three most popular majors for National Guard students. I emailed all five staff members to solicit their participation in the study. I utilized pseudonyms for the staff member participants to protect their identities.

**Table 2**

*Staff Member Participants*

| Name | Ethnicity | Gender | Work Experience |
|------|-----------|--------|-----------------|
| Rebecca | White | Female | 1-5 Years |
| Victoria | Hispanic | Female | 10-20 Years |
| Trevor | White | Male | 1-5 Years |
| Sarah | White | Female | 10-20 Years |
| Mary | White | Female | 20-30 Years |

### *Rebecca*

Rebecca is a current academic advisor in one of the most popular majors on campus for National Guard students. She has worked as an academic advisor for the last four years and prior to that she worked in the campus financial aid office with all students on campus. Rebecca is a graduate of the institution and worked as a student worker and graduate assistant on campus prior to taking on her full-time professional staff roles. She is passionate about helping National Guard students on campus and is an advocate for them within her department. Rebecca advises for a major that requires National Guard students to take most of their classes in person, so there is not a lot of flexibility built into her major.

### *Victoria*

Victoria is a current staff member in the military support office on campus who works directly with National Guard students. She has worked in her role in the military support office for ten years both as a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) work study student and in a full-time professional role. Victoria is a graduate of the institution and has deep familial roots in the surrounding communities. She is a former National Guard member and has a deep understanding and connection to the National Guard students she supports. Victoria works directly with

National Guard students regarding their college funding and advises them on the intricacies of leaving college due to mobilization.

### *Trevor*

Trevor is a current admissions counselor on campus who directly supports all non-traditional students who attend JSU. He has worked in the admissions department for the last two years and directly supports all non-traditional students who initially apply to the college or seek re-entry after an absence. Trevor works a lot with National Guard students both at their initial point of entry into the college and when they come back after an academic disruption. He is a graduate of the institution and has a connection to the military as his father retired out of the National Guard. Trevor is passionate about National Guard students and wants to help them succeed in college as he has direct knowledge of how mobilizations affect military families.

### *Sarah*

Sarah is a current academic advisor in one of the most popular majors on campus for National Guard students. She has worked on campus for the last 15 years and most of that time has been spent advising students. She is a graduate of the institution and has deep familial roots in the surrounding community. Sarah advises for a major that has a lot of flexibility in course delivery which is why it is very popular with National Guard students. Her major can be completed completely in person or online, so she advises many National Guard students who receive orders to mobilize about what options they have to continue in the major. Sarah collaborates a lot with the military support office regarding National Guard students prior to their disruptions.

*Mary*

Mary is a current academic advisor in one of the most popular majors on campus for National Guard students. She has worked on campus for 25 years as both an advisor and instructor within her department. She is a graduate of the institution and has deep familial roots in the surrounding communities. Mary advises and teaches in a major with extreme flexibility as her majors can all be completed online and have no on campus components. Due to the nature of the content taught, her department is used to providing flexibility to all students as they often must leave and return to the major due to professional responsibilities. Mary works well with mobilized National Guard students because the department recognizes that its students will have to leave and return for professional reasons and has built in flexibility to support them.

## Research Findings

After coding and analyzing the interviews with the IPA methodology, I was able to develop a cluster with emerging themes for each group of interview participants. Prior to starting the research, I expected to find different conceptual clusters due to the differing experiences and perspectives of National Guard students and staff members. I was surprised to find that both groups had the same conceptual clusters with different emerging themes that were important to that group. In the end, the fact that I found the same conceptual clusters for both groups of participants lend credibility to the research findings. I also examined relevant JSU policy and procedure to produce an in-depth look at how academic disruptions affect the college outcomes of National Guard students. This multi-faceted examination was needed to make recommendations for the future support of National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions.

A crucial aspect of the student interviews was the impact of campus and off-campus agents on the National Guard students' experiences. According to Rendón Linares & Muñoz (2011), campus and off campus agents are identified as faculty, academic and student affairs staff, family members, and peers who validated non-traditional students as valuable members of the learning community. Agents are the individuals with the most opportunity to positively impact the success of a National Guard student who is going through the three phases of mobilization. Each student was impacted by campus and off campus agents differently, but the importance of those relationships was evident in the interviews. Each of the staff members interviewed are critical campus agents that support National Guard students, their experiences and suggestions were crucial to this discussion.

**National Guard Student Data**

I conducted interviews with three current JSU National Guard students who had experienced an academic disruption during their undergraduate careers. Each experienced academic disruption for differing lengths of time and had different levels of support on and off campus. Bauman (2009) identified three phases of mobilization that National Guard students experience when leaving and returning to college after a military obligation: the pre-mobilization phase, separation phase, and return phase. Military mobilizations greatly impact the ability of National Guard students to attend college. I am interested in how campus and off campus agents (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011) influenced each phase of mobilization.

*Support Cluster*

As I began to pull out key phrases and observations from the interviews, it was clear that National Guard students thrived during the disruptions when they felt supported by on and off campus agents. When the National Guard students felt supported, they believed they could

navigate the disruption and attain their educational goals. That support was given by both on and off campus agents that the students had developed before they entered college, while they were in college, or during their military service. The impact of campus and off-campus agents was evident as each student discussed their experiences during the mobilization phases. One concept I had not considered when developing this study was who motivated our National Guard students to return to college after their mobilization. That was something brought up during the first student interview that I then incorporated during the other interviews. That type of information is very critical for college administrators to understand when designing support services.

**Clear Guidance/Policy Needed.** Each student expressed the need for clear guidance on their options during the mobilization process. Each student experienced the disruption at a different university so there was a variety of guidance provided to the students. The effect of that guidance also varied for the students. According to Sam:

The instructors were a mixed bag. Some of them were very good about giving me extensions. Some were very adamant about being in the Zoom class at the same time as the in-person class, which was unrealistic...so I had to take a few bad grades there.

What is evident from talking with these students is that when there is a lack of clear guidance or policy, the student's experience during the phases of mobilization will be heavily influenced by the motivation of the faculty or staff member working with them.

Even when the instructors were supportive or understanding during the mobilization, the university policy did not meet the reality of the student's situation. This disconnect can cause problems with National Guard students' educational goals. According to April:

They were very supportive. I thought I was going to be able to miss some time and I could keep my grades up.... but once I realized that my grades were not going to make it,

they accepted the fact that I needed to drop all my classes. The only thing that was

hard was the fact that instead of dropping the class that was low end, I could have kept

my other grades, but if you drop one you must drop all. So that's the only issue that

was there because I wasted a whole semester on one drop because of one class instead of

all my classes.

University policy regarding Incompletes and term or military withdrawals really impacts

National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after the disruption. The students voiced concerns

over whether the university policy helped or hindered their ability to attain their educational

goals.

Another issue that came up during the interviews was the guidance or policy's purpose.

The students wondered what the impetus was for the guidance they were given or the policy that

was developed to work with them during mobilizations. The goal of the guidance or policy

should be to encourage the National Guard student to return to college. According to Jake:

A policy in place where the goal was to get me back and someone was assisting me along

the way and pushing me to start back with them, that I would have gone back and

finished my degree.

National Guard students are looking for guidance and support that enables them to complete their

educational goals. University guidance and policy that matches the students' expectations are

crucial to ensure these students can re-enroll after a disruption.

**Campus and Off Campus Agents.** Much of the interview time was spent talking about

the impact of campus and off campus agents on the students' experiences during the phases of

mobilization. One of the main off-campus agents identified was the National Guard unit the

student was assigned to. The unit served as a source of encouragement for the soldiers while they were mobilized. According to Sam:

> Whatever my classes came around, I had my final exams. They made sure that I had like a whole block of the building to myself to get them done… I realize I'm very, very lucky in that they were so supportive of me and my schooling and being so young in the military, they were beyond helpful, more than I could have ever asked. I feel like if I didn't have that, if I was just at some regular unit, I wouldn't have finished those classes that semester.

The impact of the unit on the National Guard student is an important aspect to consider when thinking about how to best support National Guard students during a mobilization. The unit has a great influence over the student's ability to complete classes while mobilized and encourage educational goals when back home.

Another major off campus agent identified by National Guard students is family and friends. Family and friends play a critical role in supporting National Guard students during every phase of mobilization. The impact of the family can change the direction of their time away. According to April:

> If the soldier has a steady home, then they need a lot from their unit because they're going to put a lot into the deployment. For me, I know that my house is taken care of, so I needed a lot for my deployment from my unit to give me all the support that I needed to complete whatever they are asking of me. But if I didn't have a steady home, then I would need home help more.

Family and friends can also help support National Guard students when they lack support from their unit or university. According to Jake:

I never heard from my university after I left...... I mobilized with a unit that I was new to

and there was a lot of tension...... through all the phases no one else helped me out during

that time more than my family ultimately did.

The support of family and friends came up multiple times in each interview with the National

Guard students, often stating how they could not have made it through the mobilization without

the support of loved ones.

Of equal importance to National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions is the

support they receive on campus. These campus agents can have a profound impact on the

students if they have developed those relationships. According to April:

I got a lot of help anyways, just because I know where I'm at, not everybody

understands… how to get help through school. My mom's best friend is an advisor on

campus, so I kind of knew everything.

If the student has not developed relationships with campus agents before their academic

disruption, it can be more difficult to return to college even when you are motivated to do so.

According to Jake:

Whenever I came back from my deployment, I thought about getting back in school….

but then I decided like because of life and stuff going on that I wasn't going to start school

yet, and I think my desire to go back was there. But if someone else had been like trying

to real me in because all I did was an application, somebody else would have been trying

to recruit me, I guess I would have probably gone ahead and stuck with it.

The students mentioned on several occasions that the relationship between student and campus

agent is the responsibility of both sides. The student needs to communicate with their campus

agents about what their military obligations are, and the campus agents need to be available to answer questions and advocate for them when it is needed.

The National Guard students also talked at length about the need for campus and off campus agents varies depending on the student's phase of life. Some of the life factors that affected their need for campus or off agents were age, relationship status, parenthood, rank, or nature of their military orders. Those needs varied not only for the students that I interviewed, but for those serving with them during their mobilization. According to Jake:

> In the 2020-time frame, I was the platoon leader for MP company during that time and we had COVID orders that were coming up for mobilization. I went to Birmingham for riots, I went to Kenosha for riots. Then we got activated for six months to be on standby in case something else was to come up. For that eight-month period, I had soldiers that were trying to still go to school...... I had a good set of soldiers that also decided to not continue classes.... those that continued, I think it took both the student and the school to work together to find a solution.

During a mobilization, each National Guard student leans on campus or off campus agents to successfully navigate their academic disruption. The students felt each of these agents was important and that universities needed to realize the important role they play.

**Motivation to Return.** One component of academic disruptions that I did not consider prior to the interviews was who motivated National Guard students to return to college after their mobilization. When I asked about their motivations for returning to college after the mobilization, the students mentioned both campus and off campus agents as their impetus for returning to college. The unit they were assigned to was one of the initial responses I received. According to Sam:

I don't think I would have gone back to school if the unit that I am in now hadn't

encouraged me to do so. A lot of my coworkers are now starting back, starting to go to

school now that they see so many people within the unit starting to do so.

The unit they are assigned to significantly impacts their personal, academic, and professional

goals. The motivation received from the student's unit can greatly impact their ability to re-enroll

after the disruption.

Family and friends were identified as important motivating factors for the National Guard

students. The role that their family and friends played in motivating the students to return to

college was different. According to April:

I think the motivation came from me being able to stay home and still take care of my

kids. So, it was also a time of COVID, so everything was online...... it does make a non-

traditional mom of 3 more willing to go to school because I can take care of my kids

while they're out sick.

The motivation can be more passive, like in the case of April, but it can also be more direct for

the student. According to Jake:

I'm a police officer. One of my police officer friends and I were talking about how he was

about to finish his degree and he started telling me about the school and doing it online

and stuff like that and I just immediately jumped right on board with it.

Whether the motivation from family and friends is passive or direct, the impact it has on the

National Guard student is worth exploring because it directly impacts re-enrollment in college.

While family and friend motivation is important to the National Guard student, the

motivation can change over time. According to Jake:

My parents said whenever you get out of high school, they're like college, college,

college. But after going to basic and AIT, then going to and getting some college done,

that push from family to go back to school fizzled out...... now I'm 21 years old. They

kind of, I guess, expect me to make those decisions at that point in my life.

This change in motivation can affect the National Guard student's willingness to return to college

after the disruption. It is important for colleges to understand that students' motivations can adapt

during their college careers and the relationships built on campus can serve as a bridge between

changing motivations. Colleges also need to realize that National Guard students can also have

multiple motivations during their college careers. According to Jake:

My soldiers wanted to fulfill their duties in the army, but they didn't want to give up on

where they were at in school. They were motivated to do both, and I think the school

should be willing to work with their situation. That was helpful in enabling them to be

able to fulfill that motivation to keep it up.

This proves the relevance of both campus and off-campus agents and how they are a part of a

support ecosystem that is needed for students to navigate academic disruptions successfully.

### *Communication Cluster*

As I began to pull out key phrases and observations from the interviews, it was clear that

National Guard students relied heavily on communication to navigate the disruptions. Consistent

communication from the college reminded the National Guard students of important dates and

showed that the college valued them. Each student felt like the university either was unaware of

their absence or had forgotten that they were gone. The students also discussed how it is

important to develop a plan for post-mobilization and how communicating with them is a crucial

part of that plan. Each student also talked at length about how important it was to have flexibility

in course delivery. They each had varying levels of flexibility in their courses during their

mobilization and that impacted their ability to continue their educational pursuits.

**Unaware of Absence.** During the interviews, each student alluded to the fact that they

felt like their college did not know they were even gone. According to April:

I don't even know if they knew I was gone until I dropped…. whenever I got back, I don't

even know if any admin or anybody else knew that I was even gone.

The feelings ranged from feeling unnoticed during their academic disruptions to questions about

whether the college cared about them. According to Sam:

I don't think that the military programs at my college were very robust. I don't want to say

they weren't looking out for us, but I don't know if they thought about us.

These underlying tones of lack of trust or sympathy towards National Guard students

experiencing academic disruptions were prevalent. The students outwardly questioned the

motives of their colleges. According to Jake:

I explained to them that I was dropping out of school. I told my advisor that I wouldn't be

doing the next semester. I got orders in April and that was it, I never heard from my

college. Never heard from them again after that point.

These negative feelings experienced by the students in this study is something that colleges must

combat in the future if they want to recruit, retain, and graduate National Guard students. I have

heard similar thoughts from other groups of Student Service Members/Veterans (SSM/Vs) that I

have worked with professionally, so this issue affects all groups of SSM/Vs.

One way that a college can show that they care about their National Guard students is to

prioritize communication with them during their academic disruptions. This is especially crucial

when the student initiates the conversation. According to Sam:

I think that if your student reaches out to you and expresses how important it is that they

stay in classes, that they continue their education, that it is on the university to continue

reaching out. I think the initial contact should be on the student. At that university, if you

are identified as having mental health issues, they will reach out to you and continue to

reach out to you until they know that you're all right. I think it's very odd that they don't

have that same support for their military students.

There could be a connection between mobilizations and mental health needs for National Guard

students, but the point the student was making was that the college cared enough about students

with mental health needs enough to continuously reach out to ensure they were ok. The students

in this study felt that they too should be worthy of proactive communication. According to April:

It's a little blunt, but we pay the university and it's not necessarily like I expect you to

babysit me. I mean, we are all grown, but sometimes we do need that extra reminder of

some sort. Is there anything that we can do? This is what I can do for you type thing…

instead of well that's just tough.

Each of the students in this study voiced frustration with how they were communicated with and

treated during their academic disruptions. They hoped for better from their colleges.

The students felt they like they were in the college's periphery; they were a priority while

enrolled, but a non-interest while they took leave from the university. All communication

stopped, administrators were unaware that the students left the college, and staff and faculty were

not helpful when they tried to return. One aspect discussed by each student was their belief that

colleges needed to develop a system to track and communicate with National Guard students

during the academic disruptions. According to Jake:

I think that if the school wants to pull those students back in. I think it's important to reach

out to them and track them. Maybe give more information, but whenever they come to

them and say I won't be coming back to school for a while because of this reason. If the

student shows interest in returning, the school should do their part if they are notified.

Tracking students during academic disruptions is not only the right thing to do, but it is good

practice to ensure that these students are re-enrolling and completing their degrees. The focus on

enrollment efforts at many colleges today has shifted to non-traditional student groups, so it

makes sense to track National Guard students and keep them in the enrollment pipeline.

**Develop Plan for Post-Mobilization.** Lack of communication once the National Guard

students left their colleges was only part of the issue. Another issue the interviews shed light on

was the need for better post-mobilization planning. According to Jake:

There should be a program or something in place where they worked with me and

provided me guidance on coming back and picking up in some way where I left off that I

would have taken the time to plan things out differently than I did.

The students voiced a variety of concerns regarding their mobilizations including worries about

having a job to come back to, reconnecting with family and friends, and anxiety around returning

to their educational pursuits. Each of the students wanted to return to school, but they faced

different issues upon their return to campus. The students mentioned that it would have been

great to have an academic plan in place prior to returning to campus as that would have been one

less thing to worry about post-mobilization.

One part of the planning process is working through academic and financial concerns

when the student finds out about the mobilization. Often the students had to work through

academic and financial uncertainties surrounding the classes they are in while they are planning to mobilize. According to Sam:

> I think it would have been my advisor's responsibility to get veterans affairs and whoever was in charge of that major at the time to start talking and seeing if there was a way to finish this out.

The students were looking for answers and options to continue their educational pursuits and received a variety of support. They wanted concrete answers to if they could continue the classes, did they have to drop or take incompletes, and could they still drop or take incompletes in the future if they found completing the classes too daunting while mobilized. What the students did not want was indecision and uncertainty surrounding their academic programs.

Most of the communication and planning the students received was prior to the academic disruption, they expressed that it would have also been helpful to know what steps to take to return to college when they returned from their mobilization. According to Sam:

> When I reached out to them, it was regarding whether or not I would be able to continue in the major that I had originally gone in with, and so my advisor didn't really try to help me stay in the major at all. Her suggestion was really just to find something that didn't require any more labs. She did what she knew how to do. I don't think she really went out of her way to find out if there was a way for me to finish through that degree program.

This student should have known prior to leaving for her mobilization how she could continue in her major, what options she had to take open degree requirements if she were mobilized again, and how she could get registered when she returned. Continuous communication is needed for this post-mobilization plan, the reality is that the National Guard student has a lot of military responsibilities to complete while they are mobilized. Reminder communication should be sent

out to them when they are mobilized and when they return to set them up for success after the disruption.

      **Flexibility of Degree/Course Offerings.** Flexible degree and course offerings have become more prevalent in the last two decades. The need for these flexible offerings has increased across the board for all student groups but has always been a need for National Guard students experiencing mobilizations. According to Sam:

> Absolutely if there is any way to take these in person classes and transition them to an online format that would be wonderful.

One of the benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it showed colleges they can pivot and offer more classes and degrees online or in hybrid formats. It pushed administrators and faculty members to think about how they could offer support services and academic content usually offered in-person to a wider audience. The National Guard students interviewed in this study unanimously agreed that continued development of flexible degree and course offering was vital to their ability to re-enroll after the disruption.

      Development of flexible course and degree offerings is important, but the application of the flexibility is as important to National Guard students. This is the intersection between flexible offerings and clear guidance for working with National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. According to April:

> There was a lack of flexibility in the classes that I had for my mobilization, so I had to drop. Whenever I had my daughter, I went through a whole class when I had my daughter, and I was able to take a month from the middle of that to have her and they allowed me to come in online. That made a big difference in being able to either do it or not do it.

This student had a faculty member who seemed more understanding of her life circumstances when she was pregnant than when she had to mobilize for the military. She realized that every class was different, but she was unsure why she received more flexibility and understanding during her pregnancy compared to the military mobilization. She felt like the college should value pregnant students the same as military students and their policies related to working with each group during periods of disruption should be the same.

Motivation is also a factor in the effectiveness of flexible course and degree offerings for National Guard students. It became clear during the interviews that even when the student had to drop courses due to mobilization, motivation and flexibility played a part in re-enrollment in college for National Guard students. According to April:

I'm a science major, so some of the sciences are very hard to teach yourself and teach online. But flexibility is a must if you're going to have a military student in your class. Being able to drop those and come back, it was nice to be able to come back, but if it's a freshman that must drop a whole course, they may just not come back. But I was far enough in that I was like I've got to finish now.

In this student's case, she had to drop her classes due to the mobilization, but the flexibility to return to her major after the disruption was as important as the flexibility of the course delivery. That accompanied her intrinsic motivation to complete her degree was the catalyst needed to see positive college outcomes after the disruption. Colleges should recognize that positive college outcomes for National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions are affected by many factors that are mostly within their control to improve.

**Staff Member Data**

I conducted interviews with five current JSU staff members who have supported National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. Each staff member fell within the campus agent category of faculty or academic and student affairs staff. The staff members interviewed included: three academic advisors, one admissions counselor, and one military student coordinator. Each staff member worked at JSU for different amounts of time and had different experiences while supporting National Guard students through the academic disruptions. The information gathered from these campus agents is critical to understanding the experiences of National Guard students going through the phases of mobilization from the university's perspective.

*Support Cluster*

As I began to pull out key phrases and observations from the interviews, it was clear that staff members thrived during the disruptions when they felt supported by other staff on campus and professional development. The support of other staff members and professional development empowered the staff members to feel like they could help students navigate disruptions successfully. Staff members pointed out that the existence of a military support office on campus was crucial to their ability to support National Guard students during disruptions. It was also expressed by the staff members that clear guidance and policies are needed to ensure that staff and faculty are equipped to support National Guard students. Staff members identified a lack of clear understanding of all the withdrawal options on campus and the need for focused training on how those withdrawal options will impact National Guard students during disruptions. The focus on support initiatives from the staff perspective matches up well with the need of National Guard students to have holistic support before, during, and after mobilizations.

**Military Support Office.** Direct support of all military-connected students, including National Guard students, usually starts with a military support office on most campuses. That wasn't always the case at JSU, the university did not have a dedicated office until eight years ago. The formation of that office has had a positive impact on military-connected students. According to Mary:

> I think it was fantastic to have the office created that we now have that we didn't have before. I think that was absolutely a step in the right direction. We had a Veterans Affairs office that was housed in financial aid, it was like maybe one person and maybe an assistant. I know from an advisor and an instructor standpoint that helped me have a resource that I felt they could count on at JSU too for questions.

A common theme discussed by staff members was the level of support that the military support office provided to students, faculty, and staff. Trust is essential when working with National Guard students, but often the impact of building trust across support functions on campus is overlooked. The military support office can be a critical component of building trust among staff and faculty members and enabling others on campus to feel confident in their ability to work with National Guard students.

Trust isn't the only thing that military support offices offer to staff and faculty on campus, they also provide invaluable knowledge to their campus colleagues. These offices have the capacity to positively impact the campus commitment to supporting National Guard students during disruptions. According to Rebecca:

> I think the university does what the university does well. So I believe that we have an awesome military service office, that's well versed in the policies we have at JSU, so I

know that that office supports the students and those needs and helps them have a better

understanding of what they need to do.

The military support office is usually the first or second call when a National Guard student gets

orders to mobilize. That office must know campus policy and procedure well enough to advise

these students about withdrawal options, financial impacts, and options for returning after the

mobilization. If the military support office has built trust appropriately, then campus colleagues

will refer students to it for their expertise on how to navigate the disruption.

The military support office on campus has leveraged strategic relationships to improve

the experience of National Guard students. Collaboration is crucial between campus support

offices as they each play a role in addressing National Guard students' needs during the

disruption. This is important, because that office needs to know when and how to refer National

Guard students to campus colleagues when they need additional answers. According to Trevor:

My role is to get them back in. That's a conversation I have with them. We have an

office of military student services that I can connect you with. I feel like you guys do a

great job at supporting those students.... it's up to me to get that conversation started.

No one entity on campus can support every need for National Guard students, but the collection

of support services has a better chance. The military support office serves as a hub of that

support structure and students felt it was best suited to coordinate those support levers.

**Clear Guidance/Policy Needed.** There was extensive conversation during the interviews

about the need for clear guidance and policy regarding how faculty and staff should work with

National Guard students. Each National Guard student has different needs during the disruption

depending on their program and length of time they are gone. According to Mary:

If they know they're going to be deployed, how can I either schedule my courses so that I

can maybe still take classes, or if they're in my class, what can we do if I'm expected to

be away and not be able to be online.

The differences in needs can make developing clear guidance and policy difficult for colleges

when considering all different scenarios. According to Sarah:

Students ask if we can salvage this semester and if not, what do I need to do for the

withdrawal process. And in some instances, they might be able to get an incomplete in a

class, depending on how far along it is, and then have a chance to come back later.

National Guard students need guidance and policies that give them options and can be articulated

by faculty and staff members.

I have worked with many faculty members who want to do right by the National Guard

students, but they feel limited by a lack of defined policy. They are unsure of the protocols and

what discretion they have within the context of their class. According to Sarah:

In the military situation they have no control...... I think we need a standard protocol for

how we handle each student.

Creating defined protocols would serve two functions. First, they would give faculty and

students the flexibility to work within the needs of that specific student and mobilization.

Second, it would empower faculty members to be allies to our National Guard students and their

educational endeavors. According to Victoria:

It would be nice if that option were available to students and professors. I think giving

them the opportunity to make those decisions would be helpful for both the Professor and

the student, especially those students who already made it beyond halfway through the

term. It would be nice to come home and not have to repeat the entire course.

This takes the pressure off both faculty members and students to come to some arrangement that they feel works within the college's academic limitations. The guess work would be removed from these academic disruptions, and it would encourage communication between the two parties.

This is a great time to develop clear guidance and policy because colleges have shown the ability to pivot away from long-standing policies. Prior to 2019, JSU was less willing to adapt its academic policies, opting for stability in its academic operations. According to Rebecca:

> I feel the university could have a stronger policy on what happens when a student gets
>
> orders. Did they take Incompletes? Do they earn their grade kind of like our COVID
>
> semester. How long do those students have to complete the incomplete? During our
>
> COVID years we made it work, so I feel like we can make this work, but I don't feel like
>
> that's 100% the case.

National Guard students discussed in their interviews about how colleges valued the mental health of students and made accommodations, why couldn't they do that for military service? A similar sentiment was echoed by staff members who thought if we were flexible during the COVID pandemic, why can't we adjust our academic policies for military service?

**Training on Withdrawal Options.** I was surprised to discover during the interviews with staff members the lack of understanding with the different types of withdrawal at JSU. At JSU, there are currently three types of withdrawals that a student can pursue. According to Sarah:

> I'm not super knowledgeable about the military withdrawal, but a lot of times my military
>
> students know all the terminology. They have a great community that all have the same
>
> problems and they're all talking.

Ideally the advisors would know the differences between all withdrawal types and could better

explain the repercussions of each. It is helpful for the student to have colleagues who can talk

about their options, but often that is based off their unique experiences and that may not translate

to every other National Guard student. Staff members interviewed for this study expressed their

need for training on these withdrawal options to give them the knowledge necessary to perform

their jobs. According to Sarah:

> If I've got a question, I can call our military department. I think we need more education
>
> on what's available to students and because they're not involved in every department all
>
> the time.

> Educating staff members on the different withdrawal types is the first step to improving

their understanding. The next step in that support process is to explain which withdrawal options

are the best fit based off the National Guard student's situation. According to Rebecca:

> Knowing how to choose which one to best fit each situation, because I know no two
>
> students have the same situation, so knowing which one best fits each situation because I
>
> know that it won't just affect them academically, but financially as well.

This can be outside of the staff members' comfort zone or professional knowledge base. It is

important to show the value of expanding their knowledge base and how that can positively

impact National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. The military support office

is the hub of support services for National Guard students, but not every student contacts that

office prior to departing campus for their mobilization. Training other staff members is critical to

ensure that whomever they talk with before departure gives them good guidance.

Another idea discussed by staff members was an alternative to the standard student

withdrawal processes. Instead of having to talk with students about their withdrawal options, and

the repercussions attached to those, why not bypass the need for a full withdrawal. According to

Sarah:

> I wish that there was an automatic military incomplete. If you were to a certain point in
>
> the course, can we just work from that point forward and maybe not every class is
>
> conducive to that, but we do it in a lot of circumstances. I would like that as a readily
>
> available option that faculty feel OK using, they're real funny about giving an incomplete
>
> for anything.

By developing a policy regarding automatic military incompletes for National Guard students

experiencing academic disruptions, JSU could limit both the academic and financial impact of

the mobilization. This concept would limit the stress experienced by students worrying about re-

taking classes when they return from their mobilization, or potential financial obligations created

by the withdrawal process. These are real barriers to re-enrolling in college after disruptions for

National Guard students.

### *Communication Cluster*

As I began to pull out key phrases and observations from the interviews, it was clear that

staff members relied heavily on communication to navigate National Guard students' needs

during academic disruptions. The ability to communicate relevant and timely information to

National Guard students during the disruption helped the staff members show that they valued

the students. Staff members discussed the need for better withdrawal communication once the

student decided to withdraw from classes due to the mobilization. They also identified the need for developing tags to identify students that were on a mobilization and a system to track them until they return to college. Once the tags and tracking system are developed, the staff members talked about the necessity for automated communication plans that would be used to not only keep the student engaged with campus, but also provide relevant information on what was needed to return to college post-mobilization. These themes would work well with the student support themes to provide a better experience for National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions.

**Withdrawal Communication.** Each staff member identified a need for a more comprehensive withdrawal communication system to be used with National Guard students during their academic disruptions. Advising students on their withdrawal options is just the beginning, National Guard students need communication through all the stages of mobilization in order re-enroll in college. According to Victoria:

> We could have a better communication system if we're doing a withdrawal. We don't automatically get notified or the advisors don't know how to let us know. Or to say, hey, you might want to reach out to the military office because they may have some resources available to you. I think that there are some opportunities to improve that communication system.

Communication during the mobilization phases was an issue raised by the students interviewed for this study. Staff members and students agree that focused and relevant communication would greatly impact the students' ability to return to college. This communication's content would require consensus building between staff and students as to what is important for National Guard students to know during the pre-mobilization phase as they leave the college.

It is also crucial to decide who and how you will communicate withdrawal information to students. That will require involvement and buy-in from relevant staff members. That content should set National Guard students up for success as they leave their colleges. According to Rebecca:

> I think a managed communication plan would be a more effective way. That way we can help students with their needs while they're not here, that way they're not so stressed when they get back.

This communication would include information about how to apply for financial aid or military benefits when they return, how to find and contact your advisor when you return, and how to reactivate your student status if are gone long enough to be an inactive student. This communication should also explain campus housing policies and links to off campus housing options.

The withdrawal communication can also help to reinforce academic policies related to their withdrawal. There is often confusion among students regarding what to expect from their classes and professors when they withdraw. According to Sarah:

> I also think that when you have a student identified to have something to send out that says these are our regulations and this is what's expected from the faculty in this situation. That is JSU policy like just to be able to reiterate this is the policy.

Providing this policy reinforcement initially helps the students understand what is not only expected of their professors when they withdraw, but also what they can expect regarding the classes that they ultimately decided to drop. The hope is that they talked with an advisor prior to dropping about the impact of that drop, but that doesn't always happen. In the case that a National Guard student had to leave and withdraw quickly, and didn't consult an advisor, they

would at least get general guidance from the university and help to set realistic expectations for when they return to college.

**Tracking and Tags.** Once the college has communicated relevant information during the pre-mobilization phase, the next step is to figure out how to engage the National Guard students while they are away from the college. Engaging and communicating with National Guard students during the separation phase can be difficult, but it is worth the effort. According to Trevor:

> It would be very interesting to have a special code that doesn't exist for these students to try and collect some data there. We could pull a report and say these students have this military code due to a mobilization. Here's a list of all these students that left and which semester we can just reach out to them based off that list.

If colleges do not build out a way to identify National Guard students who have left due to a mobilization, that will negate a lot of the good work done before they leave. Developing a mobilization tag or identifier in the student system would provide a mechanism to identify these students. It would allow administrators to track data on these students and see what trends exist with students re-enrolling and completing their degrees after the disruption.

Once the college has figured out how to identify the students, the next step is to build out a tracking system with this population. Utilizing a college's early alert system is a good place to start as they usually have access to the identifiers you use with student groups. According to Rebecca:

> I know that our university pulls out special populations and we keep an extra eye out on those populations like adult learners. So I feel like, you know, it wouldn't be difficult if we can pull the adult learners from the population and give them extra resources and give

them those extra like, hey, do you need anything? Hey, how can we help? How can we assist? How can we make sure that you're successful? I feel like it would be easy to track the military students also and give those give them those same opportunities.

The same opportunity for support was a common theme for the staff members interviewed for this study, they felt like the college had mechanisms in place to track and support other student populations, so it is possible to do that for National Guard students experiencing disruptions. This would allow administrators and faculty who do not work with the National Guard students to see what is going on with them and raise awareness around their specific needs.

It is not only good practice to develop these tags and tracking capabilities, but it is also a structural necessity. Most colleges will communicate with students who have not enrolled for the next semester, but at some point, that stops. According to Mary:

If they remain active, then they are still being contacted. If they go inactive, they're no longer showing up on my radar as much. Usually, they're either still in a state where they can't do it, or they've changed their goal. Even if they go inactive, I still have my own in-house unofficial list, I'll have a notation of inactive and then I'll still reach out sometimes.

It should not be the sole responsibility of the National Guard students' advisors to keep track of them several semesters after they leave due to a mobilization. Unfortunately, National Guard students are falling out of the standard communication plans after they go inactive. This tag and tracking system would provide an opportunity to loop in all support offices to ensure the National Guard students are receiving the attention they need during their separation phase. According to Sarah:

I'd like to see something a little more official with them, not just here's a withdrawal. I'm not going to find out necessarily about the withdrawal until after the fact. It takes a minute, but it would be nice to have that. Just so that we can keep them on our radar.

**Automated Communication Plans.** Now that the college has developed a way to identify and track National Guard students during the separation phase, it is important to stay in touch with the students leading into their return phase. The staff members were not aware of the communication plan in place to talk with National Guard students looking to return. According to Victoria:

I am not aware of a system that we have in place to do that, but I do think that it should be at the university. Just stay in touch with the student, especially if we want to retain those students. I think it would be of great interest to the university to maintain communication with the students while they're deployed.

Retaining mobilized National Guard students was a topic that the staff members discussed at length, with one leaning into her own student experiences. According to Victoria:

Going back to my personal experience, but as a deployed soldier it would have made me feel good knowing, OK, I've got my university family thinking about me too, and I it would have encouraged me to continue my education with that university once I came home.

Developing an automated communication plan with mobilized National Guard students was the way staff members felt that the college could best engage them directly. That plan would keep the students engaged while they were in the separation phase and guide them back to registering at the college during their return phase.

Developing the automated communication plan will require strategic partnerships on campus and buy-in from campus agents. Staff members discussed using an updated student support structure to encourage campus buy-in. According to Sarah:

> And now I think with advising, being centralized, you've got a place to disseminate more information because I can take things back to the college as well. I'm working on my faculty to start doing navigate and now they're going to do mandatory training. If the student is active military or deployed, we could have a quick button to push that could let us know about the student.

Staff members discussed using campus partners and the centralized academic advising structure to curate relevant content for National Guard students. Several topics were identified as necessary for National Guard students looking to re-enroll at the college, such as: financial aid reminders, military education benefit reminders, setting up advising appointments, how to pay for past due balances, and how to activate their student status if it went inactive. These reminders would be sent out at pre-determined times to increase the likelihood of keeping the students engaged and thinking about the college when they are closer to returning from the mobilization.

While discussing the automated communication plans, staff members discussed what improvements the college could make to help National Guard students' return phase simpler. They identified one barrier that could be addressed that would alleviate some of the stress of returning to college during the return phase. According to Trevor:

> Students become inactive after two consecutive semesters of being gone...... maybe we extend that policy so it wouldn't be just two semesters and we extend that out a little bit further and so they wouldn't even have to reapply at all.

National Guard students face numerous challenges when returning from their mobilizations; including academic, financial, personal, family, and professional issues that are tied to restarting their lives post-mobilization. Staff members felt that extending the amount of time that students could not enroll, and still stay an active student, would ensure that they are getting consistent communication from several fronts. The National Guard students would not only be involved in the automated communication plan that is built for them, but they also would be included in the college's routine enrollment call and text plans going into new semesters.

**JSU Policy and Procedure Data**

A crucial component of this study was the analysis of current JSU policies and procedures that impact National Guard students during their phases of mobilization. First, I looked at the college's military withdrawal process to see how that impacted the pre-mobilization phase. Second, I researched the current process for tracking mobilized students while in the separation phase. Lastly, I evaluated the readmission process for students during their return phase. I was interested in the impact of current policies and procedures on National Guard students. Do the policies and procedures encourage or hinder the re-enrollment of National Guard students after disruptions?

*Military Withdrawal Process*

To evaluate the current JSU military withdrawal process, I examined the 2023-2024 JSU Undergraduate Catalog and the web site for the office of Military & Post-Traditional Student Services (MPTSS). These items were selected because they offered both the official university policy and information on how to apply for the military withdrawal. I was interested in how a National Guard student would qualify for the withdrawal, how they were advised during the military withdrawal process, and what academic and financial repercussions were a result of

using the military withdrawal. That information is important for National Guard students to know before using the military withdrawal and this policy should be included in withdrawal communication, training for staff on withdrawal options by the military support office and developing the post-mobilization plan. Proper support and communication are needed as this policy greatly impacts their ability to return to college after the mobilization.

According to the 2023-2024 JSU Undergraduate Catalog (2023), the military withdrawal is open to service members who have official military orders for a deployment or mobilization. When that official military service affects the service member's ability to be successful in their classes, they can file for the military withdrawal. National Guard students are advised to talk with the Student Financial Services, Military Support Services, and Residence Life offices when they are considering the military withdrawal to understand the financial repercussions (Jacksonville State University, 2023). The National Guard students are advised that they will be subject to all JSU academic and refund penalty policies. The students are also advised to contact the Military Support Services office with questions surrounding how to register at JSU in the future.

According to the JSU website (n.d.), the same information is provided regarding how a student qualifies for the military withdrawal, advises students to contact the relevant offices on campus to determine the financial repercussions, and explains that students using the Military Withdrawal will be subject to all academic and financial penalty policies. The site does explain how to submit the withdrawal, students submit the request digitally by using a digital forms process where the student uploads a copy of their military orders (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-e). Neither the undergraduate catalog nor the web site explained exactly what the academic and financial penalties would be for National Guard students utilizing the Military Withdrawal. I

consulted with staff member Victoria, who works in JSU's military support office and has direct knowledge of the military withdrawal process, and she verified that National Guard students using the military withdrawal get W grades for each course and the university does not charge tuition and fees to the student regardless of when the military withdrawal is processed.

***Tracking of Mobilized Students***

To evaluate the current process for tracking mobilized students, I reviewed the 2023-2024 JSU Undergraduate Catalog, the web site for the office of MPTSS, and the web site for the division of Student Success. I was interested in if mobilized students are tracked, when the tracking of these students started, and how the tracking was accomplished. I also wanted to find out if students were advised that they would be tracked and communicated with during their mobilization. This is important information for National Guard students to know about prior to their disruption as it showed them that they are valued and will not be forgotten when they leave, the college wants to them to return to college, and will include them in automated communication plans. These measures will encourage National Guard students to re-enroll after the disruption.

According to the 2023-2024 JSU Undergraduate Catalog (2023), I could not find any reference to whether mobilized students are tracked by the college. There is no indication when potential tracking starts or how the tracking would be accomplished. The catalog does describe the college's use of JSU Navigate which is an early alert system for student concerns (Jacksonville State University, 2023). I evaluated the web sites for the division of Student Success and the office of MPTSS and neither of them had it explicitly stated that National Guard students were tracked during their mobilizations or a process to self-identify as leaving for a mobilization. The Student Success web site referred to an Adult Learner success coach, but it did

not have any specific information listed about how that staff member supported National Guard students during the disruptions (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-g).

### *Readmission Process*

To evaluate the current readmission process requirements for National Guard students after disruptions, I reviewed the 2023-2024 JSU Undergraduate Catalog, the web site for the office of MPTSS, and the web site for the office of Admissions. I was interested in when a National Guard student was required to reapply to activate their student status, what the process is, and if that is communicated to National Guard students looking to return to college. According to the 2023-2024 Undergraduate Catalog (2023), a student becomes inactive when they have not enrolled for two major terms. If the student has previously attended JSU, earned credit beyond high school, and have not enrolled for two consecutive major terms, they will have to seek readmission to the college to reactivate their student status (Jacksonville State University, 2023). National Guard students would have to reapply if their mobilization forced them to not enroll for two consecutive major terms, the catalog does not explain how to reapply for admission or how that is communicated to students.

For the next evaluation, I looked at the web sites for the office of MPTSS and office of Admissions. Neither site specifically explained the criteria for when a student went into inactive status or when the National Guard student would have to seek readmission to regain active student status. The only mention of this was on the MPTSS site that discussed the Military Withdrawal, there it advised students to reach out to the MPTSS office if they had questions about registering at JSU in the future (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-e). I did find information on the Admissions web site regarding how to apply to for readmission to JSU; there is an online application at no cost for students who have previously applied or attended and all

they need to submit is transcripts for any college they have attended since they last enrolled at JSU (Jacksonville State University, n.d.-f). There is no mention on either web site about if those main support offices communicated readmission or inactive student status information with National Guard students directly during mobilizations. It is important for these sites to provide this information as they are two of the main campus agents that support National Guard students during disruptions, the policy needs to be defined with clear guidance to students looking to re-enroll in college, and the clear guidance should not deter agents from motivating students to return to college.

## Summary of Research Findings

After comparing the themes gathered during the student and staff interviews to current JSU policy and procedure, it was apparent that the institution had some positive things in place to affect both re-enrollment and graduation. The institution has a military student office that supports students and staff during the disruptions, an early alert system to track and communicate with National Guard students, and a dedicated military withdrawal policy that is helpful when National Guard students mobilize. If a National Guard student becomes inactive due to the amount of time they are away from college, JSU's procedure for reapplying is simple and not a hindrance to returning to college. Research has shown that the re-enrollment process after an academic disruption is the most crucial component for returning National Guard students (Bauman, 2009). This study also showed the importance of campus agents, making and sustaining those relationships were important to weathering the impact of disruptions. JSU can continue to leverage those campus agent relationships to motivate and encourage the re-enrollment of National Guard students after the disruptions.

The institution also has room for growth regarding the policies and procedures it has in place to support current National Guard students experiencing disruptions. The institution lacks a clear policy on what options are available to faculty who work with National Guards students during disruptions, does not track and communicate with National Guard students during the disruptions, and does not provide training to faculty and staff regarding the effects of withdrawal options. National Guard students interviewed for this study did not feel connected or valued by the college during the mobilization and wanted better communication from the college. Research has shown that non-traditional students need to feel valued and cared for in college to believe in their ability to success in college (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). JSU does not engage or leverage off campus agents to encourage re-enrollment of National Guard students after disruptions. The institution also does not offer a robust inventory of flexible course and degree options for National Guard students to use when mobilized.

The presence of support operations, tracking and communication capabilities, and campus and off-campus agents positively impacts the experiences of National Guard students re-enrolling after an academic disruption. Those capabilities can mitigate the impact of the academic disruption on National Guard students, but the key is to use the capabilities present to their full potential to improve the experiences of National Guard students and limit the disruption's impact on their ability to re-enroll in college. Research has shown that it is critical for campus agents to reach out proactively to non-traditional students instead of expecting them to reach out with questions or concerns (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The role of support and communication is crucial to understanding how academic disruptions impact National Guard students' experiences and college outcomes. This research helped to identify what components

of support and communication are the most important to implement to help National Guard students navigate academic disruptions.

## Conclusion

Researching the impact of academic disruptions on National Guard students is relevant to the reality of serving in the National Guard in modern times. With many National Guard students being recruited into serving with the promise of post-secondary education funding, it is important to understand how colleges can best support National Guard students during their disruptions and set-up them up for college success when they return home. Evaluating this problem through staff interviews, National Guard student interviews, and JSU policies and procedures provided insight into how to set National Guard students up for success post-mobilization. By aligning college policies and procedures, student needs and expectations, and staff member roles a college can positively impact the effects of academic disruptions. By improving current policies and procedures, leveraging on and off campus relationships, and utilizing technology a college can limit the impact of academic disruptions for National Guard students.

In the next chapter I will summarize and discuss the findings associated with this study on National Guard students' academic disruptions. I will also discuss the implications for further research and on current professional practice. I will address recommendations for additional research and how those will impact current practice. I will evaluate the connection between the findings of the study and theoretical underpinnings. I will also provide input on the study's limitations and any difficulties experienced in conducting it.

**Chapter 5: Interpretation and Recommendations**

This study sought to address gaps in the research by focusing on how deployments and mobilizations affect the academic stability of National Guard students on college campuses. There exists a dearth of research focused on National Guard students overall and very little has been completed on how higher education institutions mitigate the academic disruptions of National Guard students' military obligations. Institutions can mitigate these academic disruptions through the development of effective re-enrollment policies (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This case study explored the effectiveness of re-enrollment policies for National Guard students at Jacksonville State University (JSU), a small, Regional Public University (RPU) in the South. National Guard students experience constant academic disruption due to their military obligations and college re-enrollment policies have a direct impact on their ability to re-enroll after the disruption.

This case study explored multiple sources of information related to academic disruptions experienced by National Guard students at JSU. I interviewed current National Guard students who have experienced at least one semester of academic disruption due to a military mobilization to better understand their experiences of re-enrolling in college after the disruption. I also interviewed current staff members who support National Guard students during the disruptions for their perspectives on how JSU policies and procedures impacted students' ability to re-enroll in college after the disruptions. The analysis of these different sources of information tied back into the main research questions of the study:

1. How do National Guard students describe their experiences of re-entry into college after an academic disruption?

2. How do academic disruptions due to military service affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college?

3. How do administrators perceive the impact of institutional policies and procedures on their ability to help National Guard students re-enroll in college after an academic disruption?

## Summary of Findings

Through this study I ascertained what impacted and motivated National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after an academic disruption. The role of support and communication was identified as crucial to understanding how academic disruptions impact National Guard students' experiences and college outcomes. This research helped to identify what components of support and communication are the most important to implement to help National Guard students navigate academic disruptions. It was evident that JSU did some things well in support of National Guard students, but there was also room for growth. Evaluating this problem through staff interviews, National Guard student interviews, and JSU policies and procedures provided insight into how to set National Guard students up for success after disruptions.

The importance of support structure and opportunities during the disruptions was clear early in the study. When the students talked about their experience navigating the phases of mobilization, they often referred to who their support system was during that time. Their support system differed depending on their circumstances and phase of life, but each student needed their support system to return to college and ultimately earn their degrees. When the staff members talked about working with students during disruptions, they talked about the importance of providing the correct guidance and support during difficult and unstable times. They referenced

their desire to see these students come back to college and complete their educational goals and they realized that the college played a big part in making that a reality.

The importance of clear and consistent communication during the disruptions was apparent early in the study. For students, they felt like the university was unaware of their absence was they left for the mobilization. The students also wanted flexibility in their degree and courses offerings and talked about the importance of developing a post-mobilization plan with the college. For staff members, they felt it was important to provide timely and informative withdrawal communication to National Guard students. They also touched on the importance of tracking National Guard students during their disruptions and building out automated communication plans for the phases of mobilization.

**Findings for RQ#1 How do National Guard students describe their experiences of re-entry into college after an academic disruption?**

*Campus and Off Campus Agents*

The importance of campus and off campus agents on the lives of National Guard students was a main finding of this study. Rendón Linares identified agents as faculty, academic and student affairs staff, family members, and peers who validated non-traditional students as creators of knowledge and valuable members of the learning community and fostered personal development and social adjustment (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Agents are the individuals with the most opportunity to positively impact the success of a National Guard student who is going through the three phases of mobilization. Leveraging both campus and off campus agents is important, because we know that SSM/Vs are less likely to use support services (Livingston et al., 2011) and will seek out off campus support networks for assistance (Jones, 2020). The

experiences of National Guard students in this study varied and showed the value of campus and off campus agents.

National Guard students identified their units, family/friends, and staff members as critical campus and off campus agents. First, the unit has a great influence over the student's ability to complete classes while separated and encourage educational goals after the mobilization. Second, family and friends play a critical role in supporting National Guard students during every phase of mobilization. Third, developing relationships with campus support offices before academic disruption matters, because it can be more difficult to return to college if they are not, even when you are motivated to do so. The students mentioned on several occasions that the relationship between student and campus agent is the responsibility of both sides.

The presence of campus agents was important, as was developing the relationship and building trust in advance. I have seen the importance of building trust with campus agents, as many National Guard students have not asked questions before leaving for their mobilizations due to lack of trust. Not trusting campus agents is common as conflicts with peers or faculty members can have a negative impact on the willingness of National Guard students to try and connect on campus (Barry et al., 2014) and contribute to lower reported sense of belonging (Vest et al., 2020). The other students leaned heavily on their families and units for advice and support in lieu of campus agents. This matches up with my professional experience working with National Guard students, they tend to ask other members of their unit or family members for advice when navigating academic disruptions and not campus agents.

The need for campus and off campus agents varied based off the phase of life the National Guard student was in. That need was impacted by various factors, such as age, relationship status, parenthood, rank, and type of military orders. Campus and off campus agents

filled gaps of support for National Guard students based off these factors. When students were younger and did not have kids, they required more support from their units or colleges. When the students were older and parents, they required more support from their families and friends to manage the disruptions. If they were on short term orders, they needed more support from their colleges and if they were on long term orders, they needed more support from their families and friends.

### *Motivation to Return*

The experiences of National Guard students returning to college after the disruption is heavily influenced by the motivations of campus and off campus agents. According to Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011), non-traditional students experienced belief in their ability to succeed in college when they were validated by in and out of class agents. For National Guard students, this could be the first time they felt cared for and that their life experiences were valued. Being validated by either campus or off-campus agents greatly impacted National Guard students returning to college after the disruption. These agents encouraged or reaffirmed the student's commitment to their academic pursuits and provided the support each student needed based off their phase of life (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Campus and off campus agents directly impact and encourage National Guard students returning to college.

National Guard students identified their unit, family, and friends as the agents that motivated them to return to college after the disruption. The unit they are assigned to significantly impacted their academic goals, specifically their ability to re-enroll after a disruption. Encouragement from military leaders to finish college and witnessing fellow National Guard troops pursue their degrees after a mobilization is highly motivating. The motivation from family and friends can be passive or direct, whether it is providing time for the National Guard

students to continue college classes or encouraging them to return to college and offering suggestions on flexible programs. The impact that these agents have as motivating forces is worth exploring because it directly impacts college re-enrollment.

Motivations for seeking a college degree can also change for National Guard students during their time in college, that change can affect the National Guard students' willingness to return to college after the disruption. As motivating factors or agents change for the student, it is important for National Guard students to use the relationships they have built to serve as a bridge when those motivating factors are shifting. That is the beauty of engaging campus and off campus agents, when one starts to be less motivating the other can step in and provide the motivation needed to be successful. Colleges also need to realize that National Guard students can also have multiple motivations during their college careers. National Guard students want to be successful in college and the military, campus and off-campus agents are needed as part of a support ecosystem that helps students to navigate academic disruptions.

### *Unaware of Absence*

National Guard students in this study talked at length about how they felt like they were invisible to the college once they mobilized. This is not uncommon as SSM/Vs are a difficult group to support within postsecondary education as they often exist as invisible members of the campus community; due to their maturity, humility, and pride (Livingston et al., 2011). The feelings of invisibility for these students were driven by their college not communicating with them when they left for their mobilization or thinking about returning. JSU should do a better job of communicating with National Guard students as that will show the college values them and wants them to return to campus after their mobilization. I have had several National Guard

students, not included in this study, tell me that no one knew they left for their mobilization and wondered if the college cared.

National Guard students felt like their college did not know they were gone, and they outwardly questioned the motives of their colleges. The feelings ranged from feeling unnoticed during their academic disruptions to questions about whether the college cared about them. There was an underlying tone of lack of trust or sympathy towards National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. Colleges will have to address concerns of value and care if they want National Guard students to re-enroll after disruptions (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). One way that a college can show that they care about their National Guard students is to prioritize communication with them during their academic disruptions. The students in this study felt that they should receive proactive communication and voiced frustration with how they were communicated with and treated during their academic disruptions. The students felt they were a priority while enrolled, but a non-interest while they took leave from the university.

**Findings for RQ#2 How do academic disruptions due to military service affect National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college?**

*Flexibility of Degree/Course Offerings*

One item that students identified as crucial to their academic success after the disruption was the presence of flexible degree/course offerings. Long- or short-term mobilizations and monthly or yearly drill requirements are not restricted to only weekend days, military drill and short-term activations can spill over into normal class days during the week which can cause academic difficulties or delays (Lunceford et al., 2020). National Guard students require flexible degree/course offerings to re-enroll in college after an academic disruption. Each student experienced a different type of disruption, one student had to withdraw completely before the

mobilization. One student could continue classes while mobilized and one tried to finish them but had to drop them because the classes were difficult to complete remotely.

The flexibility of degree/course offerings is crucial because the gaps in educational experiences caused by mobilizations adversely affect academic progress and achievement (Barry et al., 2014). National Guard students are also at greater risks for financial penalties or credit for work completed prior to leaving for a mobilization (Barry et al., 2014). These students require the flexibility to re-join their academic program where they left it and complete any courses not finished during the disruption. The National Guard students in this study did not face financial penalties or difficulty completing their classes, if they could not finish the courses while mobilized the college worked with them to drop the courses so there would not be an academic penalty. In my experience, the National Guard students who fail to return to college are those who have financial penalties that keep them from re-enrolling.

One of the benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it showed colleges they can pivot and offer degrees and classes online or in hybrid formats. It pushed administrators and faculty members to think about how they could offer academic content usually offered in-person to a wider audience. The National Guard students felt that continued development of flexible degree and course offerings was vital to their ability to re-enroll after a disruption. Students also felt that the application of flexibility is important to National Guard students, and they should be as valued as other student groups needing flexibility and understanding. Flexibility and understanding should be given whether they are a National Guard student mobilizing or a pregnant student navigating an upcoming delivery.

*Develop Plan for Post-Mobilization*

The National Guard students in this study identified the need for developing a plan for post-mobilization as a critical step to ensure that they could re-enroll in college after the academic disruption. This should not be a surprise, as effective academic advising for SSM/Vs ensures timely progression through degree programs (Arminio et al., 2015) and access to tutoring ensures successful remediation of academic deficiencies (Molina & Ang, 2017). The students in this study mentioned that if they had developed a plan for post-mobilization prior to leaving, they would have been in a much better position when they returned to college. The post-mobilization plan would have helped mitigate the impact of the academic disruption on their ability to re-enroll. Research has shown that SSM/Vs have outside work and family obligations which cause low GPA's and a decreased sense of belonging on campus (Durdella & Kim, 2012). Based off my experience, developing these post-mobilizations plans with National Guard students would alleviate the social, personal, and academic strain of leaving and returning from a mobilization.

The need for better post-mobilization planning was identified as a concern for National Guard students, because they all wanted to return to college. They all faced different issues upon return from the mobilization, ranging from worries about having a job to come back to, reconnecting with family and friends, and anxiety around returning to their educational pursuits. Having a plan in place before returning to campus would have helped ease concerns about academic and financial concerns created by the mobilization. The National Guard students wanted concrete answers to if they could continue the classes, did they have to drop or take incompletes, and how did all that affect their military education benefits and federal student aid. They wanted to know college was taken care of while they were gone, what the students did not want was indecision and uncertainty surrounding their return to their academic programs.

*Clear Guidance/Policy Needed*

National Guard students were concerned with the guidance they received from campus administrators and college policies that affected their academic disruptions. They wanted clear guidance from their campus support offices about what to expect from their current classes, what their responsibility was to those classes, and how to navigate the financial and academic ramifications of continuing or dropping those classes. According to Livingston et al. (2011), returning National Guard students view the re-enrollment process as an individual hurdle and not something the college should plan for proactively. The National Guard students involved in this study disagreed with that previous research, they felt like if the student initiated the conversation about how to best navigate the disruption, that the college should meet them halfway. I agree with the students, because in my professional experience most National Guard students have a lot on their minds when they are leaving for a mobilization and will not be in a mental state to advocate for themselves effectively.

National Guard students also want clear college policies developed that help ensure that they meet their educational goals. Campus policies regarding leaving and re-enrolling on campus after a mobilization are important for National Guard students to ensure they are not prohibited from finishing their degrees (Livingston et al., 2011; Bauman, 2009). The students involved in this study, plus those National Guard students that I have worked with professionally, each have individual academic and professional goals tied to their college journey. The motivations for attending college differ, but National Guard students want to both serve their country and complete their college degree. That is why it is so important for colleges to develop helpful withdrawal and return policies that enable National Guard students to return and finish their degrees instead of limiting their opportunities.

Each National Guard student in this study experienced disruption at different universities, so there were various guidance and policies provided to them. When there is a lack of clear guidance or policy, the student's experience during the phases of mobilization will be heavily influenced by the motivation of the faculty or staff member working with them. Even when the faculty and staff members were supportive during the mobilization, the university policy did not always meet the reality of the student's situation. National Guard students are looking for guidance and support that enables them to complete their educational goals. University guidance and policy that matches the students' expectations are crucial to ensure these students can re-enroll after a disruption.

**Findings for RQ#3 How do administrators perceive the impact of institutional policies and procedures on their ability to help National Guard students re-enroll in college after an academic disruption?**

*Military Support Office*

The JSU administrators interviewed for this study believed the best institutional practice JSU had was their military support office. There are several models of military support offices utilized by colleges and JSU chose the most popular model. JSU provides a one-stop model that houses all support services for military-connected students in one department (Hitt et al., 2015). The one-stop model allows JSU to use a more nuanced approach to understanding the SSM/V population and ensure that the college is approaching lingering issues regarding SSM/V access and success appropriately (Molina & Morse, 2015). Administrators felt that the military support office was the best entity to coordinate campus support efforts for National Guard students and could advocate with both faculty and staff regarding policies and options during disruptions. In my experience, the military support office can serve that critical function for National Guard

students if they have trained other staff effectively on campus and are actively tracking and communicating with the students during the disruption.

Military support offices were identified as major sources of support for National Guard students according to staff members. Trust is essential when working with National Guard students and the military support office can be a critical component of building trust among staff and faculty members and enabling others on campus to feel confident in their ability to work with National Guard students. These offices can positively impact the campus commitment to supporting National Guard students during disruptions. The military support office is usually the first or second call when a National Guard student gets orders to mobilize. They serve as a hub of the campus support structure (Hitt et al., 2015) and staff members felt it was best suited to coordinate campus efforts to support National Guard students during disruptions.

If the military support office has built trust appropriately, then campus colleagues will refer students to it for their expertise on how to navigate the disruption. That expertise is based off knowing campus policy and procedure well enough to advise faculty, staff, and students about withdrawal options, financial impacts, and options for returning after the mobilization. No one entity on campus can support every need for National Guard students, but the collection of support services has a better chance. Collaboration is crucial between campus support offices as they each play a role in addressing National Guard students' needs during the disruption. Military support offices build these collaborative relationships to know when and how to refer National Guard students to campus colleagues when they need additional answers.

### *Clear Guidance/Policy Needed*

The administrators in this study agreed with the National Guard students that clear guidance and policy is needed for the students to successfully navigate the disruptions. Colleges

enroll National Guard students that concurrently undertake full-time study and part-time military service and can be activated to military service multiple times during their academic careers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Administrators were not surprised by this as most had worked with National Guard students who had left JSU several times due to a military obligation. JSU is ahead of the curve when supporting mobilized National Guard students because it has a military withdrawal policy that provides financial and academic relief and an easy way to re-enroll. A federal study conducted in the mid 2000s found that 80% of colleges enrolled students who withdrew due to military service and only two-thirds of those colleges have implemented policies around refunded tuition or limited academic penalties (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

If National Guard students can be activated or mobilized multiple times during college, then the administrators felt that JSU should provide accommodations. Research has shown that withdrawal and re-admission policies should accommodate National Guard students who are continually activated for military service during their studies to ensure seamless re-enrollment (Arminio et al., 2015). Administrators pointed towards the availability of the military withdrawal and re-admission processes as the main way JSU provides National Guard students appropriate accommodation. These policies are helpful, but it is not very clear either in the college catalog or relevant support websites how exactly they help the student financially or academically. The student must talk with the military support office to find out the withdrawal provides W grades, and the college does not charge the students for the classes.

### Training on Withdrawal Options

The administrators interviewed for this study felt that the withdrawal options available to National Guard students were effective but lacked a complete understanding of how they impacted them. They wanted more training on how the withdrawal options worked, how they

impacted students, and what situations were the best to use each option. Research suggests that the main academic factors that impact college success for SSM/Vs are struggling with reintegrating back into society after military service (Arminio et al., 2015) and juggling multiple life priorities outside of college (Durdella & Kim, 2012). National Guard students are experiencing both issues during the mobilization phases, which makes it important for administrators to be confident in providing the correct information to National Guard students who need extra assistance. In my experience, students do not always reach out to the military support office when they get orders, so equipping other administrators with the tools and knowledge to help National Guard students is critical and often leads to good college outcomes for students.

Currently there are three types of withdrawal options that a student can pursue at JSU, staff members mentioned a lack of understanding of the different types of withdrawal at JSU. Staff members interviewed for this study expressed their need for training on these withdrawal options to give them the knowledge necessary to support National Guard students during the disruptions. It is also important to explain which withdrawal options are the best fit based off the National Guard student's situation could better explain the repercussions of each. The military support office is the hub of support services for National Guard students, but not every student contacts that office prior to departing campus for their mobilization (Bauman, 2009). Training other staff members is critical to ensure that whomever they talk with before their mobilization gives them appropriate guidance.

### *Withdrawal Communication*

Withdrawal communication was not consistent among administrators who worked with National Guard students at JSU. Pertinent information regarding incompletes, financial and

academic implications of withdrawals, and deadlines for registering for future semesters would set National Guard students up for positive college outcomes upon their return. Research shows that not all colleges provide the same level of support (Bondi et al., 2020), so it is imperative that colleges provide this information proactively to ensure access to needed services (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Other researchers have suggested developing formal return processes and orientations to assist National Guard students with getting back into the college, activating their funding sources, and connecting with campus advocates (Bauman, 2009). That would be the ideal situation for National Guard students, I believe the best way forward now for JSU would be to formalize the relevant withdrawal information as suggested above and work with the military support office to provide that communication to mobilized National Guard students.

The withdrawal communication helps to reinforce academic and college policies related to their withdrawal and return to campus. There is often confusion among National Guard students regarding what to expect from their classes, professors, and college when they withdraw. This would include information about how to apply for financial aid or military benefits, how to find and contact your advisor, and how to reactivate your student status if you are gone long enough to be an inactive student. This communication would also explain campus housing policies, links to off campus housing options, information on how to complete incompletes, and how to pay for past due balances. Providing this policy reinforcement will help students understand what is expected of them when they leave college and what they can expect when they can return to campus.

*Tracking and Tags*

Currently JSU does not have a formal process to identify mobilized National Guard students or track what happens once they leave campus. I believe developing these tags within

JSU's early alert system Navigate would be the best place to build out the tracking system needed for mobilized National Guard students. Researchers suggest that when National Guard students mobilize, they should be tracked either in the admissions or military support office to ensure they can be re-admitted easily upon return (Arminio et al., 2015). The military support office would be the best entity to coordinate the tracking of mobilized National Guard students, because they know that current SSM/Vs have unique needs that need to be identified and addressed by administrators to ensure their success in college (Bondi et al., 2020; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The military support office has the knowledge of how military mobilizations work, how long they could be gone, what academic trends are emerging from previous mobilizations, and how to work with faculty and administrators when unique situations present themselves.

Developing tags and tracking capabilities is important, because JSU will stop communicating with National Guard students once they are inactive. National Guard students will go inactive after two consecutive major semesters with no registration (Jacksonville State University, 2023). Often, the responsibility of keeping track of National Guard students falls to their academic advisors, but students who experience long-term mobilizations are falling out of the standard communication plans because they go inactive. The tag and tracking system would act as a supplement to the standard college communication plan and ensure that these National Guard students are not lost from college communication during their mobilization. It would provide an opportunity for administrators, staff, and faculty to directly communicate with National Guard students about their needs and things to remember before returning to campus.

*Automated Communication Plans*

Automated communication plans would be very beneficial and ensure continual engagement with National Guard students who are mobilized. These plans would provide proactive financial aid and military benefits support which is critical due to the complexity of military benefits (Molina & Morse, 2015) and alleviate a lack of understanding on how federal financial aid works (Molina & Ang, 2017). In my experience, knowing how to restart college funding sources, how those sources were impacted by the mobilization, and how to re-enroll in classes are the major roadblocks that National Guard students face when returning to college. The automated communication plans would help to alleviate most of the anxiety National Guard students face around those roadblocks, especially if the content is curated appropriately and provided when needed by students. These plans should also be coordinated by the military support office as part of the proposed National Guard tracking system.

The staff members were not aware of a communication plan in place to provide information to National Guard students looking to return to college. Retention of mobilized National Guard students was a topic thoroughly discussed by staff members and the development of an automated communication plan was the way identified to best communicate with mobilized National Guard students. That automated plan would keep the students engaged while they were in the separation phase and guide them back to registering at JSU during their return phase. The automated plans would involve curated content for National Guard students that is sent out at pre-determined times to increase the likelihood of keeping the students engaged and thinking about JSU when they are closer to returning from the mobilization. The following topics were identified as necessary for National Guard students looking to re-enroll at the college: financial

aid reminders, military education benefit reminders, setting up advising appointments, how to pay for past due balances, and how to activate their student status if it went inactive.

## Summary Statement

After completing this case study of JSU support of National Guard students' academic disruptions, it was apparent that the institution had some positive things in place to affect both re-enrollment and graduation. The institution has a military student office that supports students and staff during the disruptions, an early alert system to track and communicate with National Guard students, and a dedicated military withdrawal policy that is helpful when National Guard students mobilize. If a National Guard student becomes inactive due to the amount of time they are away from college, JSU's procedure for reapplying is simple and not a hindrance to returning to college. This study also showed the importance of campus agents and how developing and sustaining those relationships were important to weathering the impact of disruptions. JSU should investigate how it can better leverage campus agent relationships to motivate and encourage the re-enrollment of National Guard students after their disruptions.

JSU also has room for growth surrounding what it has in place to affect both re-enrollment and graduation after National Guard students experience disruptions. The institution lacks a clear policy on what options are available to faculty who work with National Guard students during disruptions, does not track and communicate with National Guard students during the disruptions, and does not provide training to faculty and staff regarding the effects of withdrawal options. National Guard students interviewed for this study did not feel connected or valued by the college during the mobilization and wanted better communication from the college. JSU does not engage off campus agents to encourage re-enrollment for National Guard

students after their disruptions. The institution also does not offer a robust inventory of flexible course and degree options for National Guard students to use during or after their disruptions.

The study of the impact of academic disruptions on college outcomes for National Guard students is important because it affects how colleges support National Guard students on campuses all over this country. It impacts how higher education professionals develop policies for supporting National Guard students who leave on last-minute mobilizations and come back to finish their education. The nature of National Guard students' military service will continue to require their abrupt departures from our college campuses, it is important to understand how our colleges can develop re-enrollment and graduation policies that reward that military service. We learned from this research that support and communication from a college will help limit the effects of academic disruptions on National Guard students' college outcomes. The tools to limit the effects of disruptions exist already on campus, it is up to administrators to leverage their expertise and infrastructure appropriately.

This case study covered one Regional Public University (RPU) in the South, and its results are not an overall reflection of academic disruptions on National Guard students. More research is needed to better understand the issue of academic disruptions nationwide to provide a more holistic overview of the problem and possible solutions. There are a few questions that have been left unanswered. First, does the impact of academic disruptions change when you look at different geographical regions? Second, does the impact of academic disruptions change when you look at different institutional types? Third, do campus or off campus agents impact positive college outcomes more after an academic disruption? Lastly, what are the main motivating factors for National Guard students to re-enroll and graduate after an academic disruption?

**Implications for Further Research**

The current study was an extension of previous research conducted by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) through the National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST). According to Cate et al. (2017), the NVEST was created to provide data on SSM/V persistence, transfer, and attrition rates. The NVEST project looked at SSM/Vs using the Post 9/11 GI Bill between August 2009 and December 2013 to more accurately demonstrate the academic success of current SSM/Vs (Cate et al, 2017). The NVEST project found a 28.4% attrition rate for SSM/Vs, which means they did not complete their degree or certificate in the sample time frame and did not register the next semester after the sample (Cate et al., 2017). Researchers theorized that one of the main causes of attrition for National Guard students was having at least one withdrawal due to military service which they found to be true for 58.6% of National Guard students during the sample time frame (Cate et al., 2017).

This study helped to advance research surrounding academic disruptions and how they affect the ability of National Guard students to re-enroll in college. The study highlighted the importance of support and communication to National Guard students during their academic disruptions. Campus and off campus agents had a great impact on National Guard students re-enrolling after the disruption by providing guidance or motivation to return to college. College withdrawal and re-enrollment policies also greatly impact National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after the disruption. It is important to have a dedicated military support team with the relevant military expertise to support National Guard students during times of academic disruption, not only for the students but for staff and faculty members. It is also important to develop tracking and communication systems for National Guard students during disruptions, to ensure they feel valued and not forgotten by the college.

The topic of academic disruptions of National Guard students and their impact on re-enrollment does warrant additional research. This study was limited to one campus in the South, the findings are relevant to the overall conversation, but expansion of this study is needed to gain a better understanding of the overall issue. I believe that two additional, national studies are needed to expand our understanding of this issue. First, a survey needs to be developed around the findings of this current study and sent out to all American colleges and universities who have National Guard students. Then researchers can determine if the findings of this study have national significance or if they are just relevant at JSU. Second, we need to revisit the collaboration on the NVEST project and pull national data again with a focus on National Guard attrition. Researchers could then focus on why National Guard students are not re-enrolling and completing their degrees and what factors lead to those negative college outcomes. That would give researchers direct data related to academic disruptions and their impact on college outcomes.

Further inquiry needs to be made into the overall effectiveness of withdrawal and re-enrollment policies for National Guard students. There were pros and cons for JSU's withdrawal and re-enrollment policies, further research should be conducted on what types of withdrawal and re-enrollment policies are most beneficial to National Guard students who experience academic disruptions. That research should look at what is of most importance; financial relief, academic relief, or both to the ability of National Guard students to re-enroll after the disruption. Further research should also evaluate what types of re-enrollment policies are the most effective to encourage re-enrollment after disruptions. That research should look at policies around when students are transitioned to inactive status, requiring a new application or application fee to re-

activate a student status, and tracking and communicating with National Guard students when they are mobilized.

Additional research also needs to look at which campus support offices are most important to National Guard students during disruptions. This study identified the military support office as important to staff members, but it did not address what offices impacted National Guard students the most during disruptions. It would be beneficial to understand which campus agents are most important to National Guard students and how colleges can set-up their support services to encourage those relationships. Research also needs to be conducted to determine what off campus agents are the most important to National Guard students during their disruptions. This study discussed the impact and motivating factors of family, friends, and military units on National Guard students, but there are bound to be other off campus agents that are impactful. One of the students in this study discussed the impact of co-workers on his disruption, additional research should look at co-workers and identify other off campus agents. What are the best ways to engage off campus agents to help encourage re-enrollment in college after the disruption?

## Implications for Practice and Recommendations

During the interviews for this study, both National Guard students and staff members agreed that the military support office should be the main conduit for advocacy and coordination during disruptions. Ideally advocacy and coordination would be a collaborative process between the military support office, other support units, and faculty. That may happen up front to a certain extent, but I do not believe that to be the reality of most institutions. The military support office will end up taking on the heavy lifting for these as other staff members will not want the additional responsibilities. It will be paramount for staff members in the military support office

to develop effective collaborations with other staff members on campus who are motivated to support National Guard students. It will also be important to find champions within the faculty and administration to develop and implement policy and procedure updates that benefit National Guard students experiencing disruptions.

This reliance on the military support office to provide all support and coordination for National Guard students has been built into many colleges' organizational structures over the past decade. This is common with non-traditional or special population student groups at institutions across the country. The over-reliance on a small group of staff members to impact enrollment for a group of students on campus is negatively impacting those students in my opinion. It is also negatively impacting the staff members who work to support them by providing unrealistic expectations about what they can deliver the college. These unrealistic expectations and over-reliance are negatively impacting the military support office's ability to support National Guard students when they are most in need during their disruptions. This is a common theme with all support offices dedicated to a particular student group and colleges should reevaluate how they are set up to support all students.

This study showed the importance of several factors that impact the practice of college personnel who support National Guard students during disruptions. First, identifying staff members with military expertise and building them into the support process is crucial for National Guard students navigating disruptions. Second, leveraging campus and off campus agents that have relationships with National Guard students impacts re-enrollment after the disruptions. Third, providing training on withdrawal options, how those impact National Guard students after the disruption, and the appropriate times for the withdrawal options empowers staff members outside of the military support office to positively guide National Guard students

during their disruptions. After careful consideration of the National Guard student and staff member interviews and current JSU policies and procedures, several policy and procedure recommendations presented themselves.

**Clear Policies and Guidance**

Each National Guard student has different needs during the disruption depending on their program and length of time they are gone. The differences in needs can make developing clear guidance and policy difficult for colleges when considering all different scenarios. National Guard students need guidance and policies that give them options and can be easily articulated by faculty and staff members. Developing guidance and policy with student needs and expectations in mind serves two purposes. First, it gives faculty and students the flexibility to work within the needs of that specific student. Second, it would empower faculty members to be allies to our National Guard students and their educational endeavors. This takes the pressure off both faculty members and students to come to an acceptable arrangement and it would encourage communication between the two parties.

The disconnect between policy and students' expectations can cause problems with National Guard students' educational goals. University policy regarding incompletes, military withdrawals, inactive student status, and re-admission impacts National Guard students' ability to re-enroll after a disruption. The students voiced concerns over whether the university policy helped or hindered their ability to attain their educational goals. In my opinion, those specific concerns were due to the pertinent details of the official policy not being readily available to students. Colleges need to include details about academic and financial repercussions associated with incompletes, withdrawals, student status, and readmission in the college's catalog and

relevant web sites in case the student searches out the information online instead of contacting the military support office for assistance.

**Alternative Policy Options**

Staff members pitched the idea of bypassing the need for utilizing withdrawal options and the repercussions attached to each. The alternative option is developing a policy regarding automatic military incompletes for National Guard students experiencing academic disruptions. JSU could limit both the academic and financial impact of the mobilization by implementing automatic military incompletes that students could complete at a convenient time in the future. This concept would limit the stress experienced by students worrying about re-taking classes when they return or potential financial obligations created by the withdrawal process. These are real barriers to re-enrollment in college for National Guard students and easily addressed by implementing this alternative option to the standard withdrawal process.

Staff members also liked extending the amount of time students could not enroll and stay on active student status. They felt that was one barrier that could be addressed rather easily that would alleviate some of the stress of returning to JSU after the disruption. By updating this policy, JSU would ensure that National Guard students are getting consistent communication from the college. First, they would be included in JSU's routine re-enrollment call and text plans used to ensure maximum enrollment in new semesters. Second, National Guard students would be involved in the newly developed automated communication plan that is tailored to them during academic disruptions. This simple policy change would keep students active longer and not require a readmission application or fee upon their return from the disruption.

**Flexibility and Motivation**

Motivation and flexibility also played a part in the re-enrollment of National Guard students after the disruption. Whether the students completed their classes or had to withdraw, the flexibility to return to their major and personal motivating factors were the catalyst to re-enrolling in college after the disruption. Some students needed the flexibility of their degree programs more and some needed personal, family, or professional motivations more. Colleges should recognize this and create flexibility not only in their degree/class offerings, but in how and when National Guard students can re-enter their degree programs. Creating this flexibility would match the needs of National Guard students who are constantly leaving and returning to college due to military obligations. Colleges should also utilize parent and family programs on campus to build relationships with off campus agents who often are the source of motivation for National Guard students to return to college. They can also provide insights that can assist with developing appropriate college policy and procedure and how best to communicate with National Guard students when they are mobilized.

**Tracking and Tags**

Engaging and communicating with National Guard students during the disruption can be difficult if colleges do not build out a way to identify National Guard students who have left due to mobilization. Developing a mobilization tag in the student system would provide a mechanism to identify these students. The college's early alert system is a convenient place to track National Guard students as it has access to the student system where the tags were developed for mobilized National Guard students. Tracking National Guard students within the early alert system would allow administrators to identify data and trends of students re-enrolling after the

disruption. Administrators, staff, and faculty members who work with these students can also stay abreast of what is going on while they are gone and their specific needs.

**Improved Communication**

The need for a more comprehensive communication system was identified as a crucial step for how students and staff members communicate during the mobilization phases. Advising students on their withdrawal options is a good first step, but National Guard students need communication that is relevant and consistent throughout their disruption to re-enroll in college. Staff members and students agree that focused and curated communication would greatly impact the students' ability to re-enroll in college. The military support office should take the lead on this and collaborate with other support offices to develop the content and schedule when the automated communication will be released. This improved communication set-up should set National Guard students up for success as they leave and set realistic expectations for when they return to college.

National Guard students who experience multiple academic disruptions need college policies and procedures and support from staff members to navigate these challenging times. They need clearly defined policies and appropriate guidance that gives them options aligned with their academic and military expectations. Colleges should evaluate their incomplete and inactive student status policies to ensure that they match the reality of National Guard students' military obligations. National Guard students also need flexibility with their course and degree offerings and when they can re-enter their degree programs after a disruption. Colleges also need to track and improve communication with National Guard students during their disruptions if they want to encourage their re-enrollment after a disruption.

**Relationship of Findings to Theory**

According to Rendón Linares & Muñoz (2011), non-traditional students experienced belief in their ability to succeed in college when they were validated by in and out of class agents. Providing validating experiences to SSM/Vs will help them overcome their existing anxieties, fears, and prior invalidation experiences (Bondi et al., 2020) and is especially important to National Guard students who tend to doubt their ability to finish classes when they leave unexpectedly (Bauman, 2009). The findings of this study support the significance of providing validating experiences to National Guard students and the importance of campus and off campus agents. National Guard students interviewed discussed how their campus (support offices, advisors, and faculty members) and off campus (National Guard units, family, friends, and coworkers) agents support and encouragement was vital to their return to college after the disruption. Those agents motivated the National Guard students to return to college even though it was difficult to transition back to civilian life.

National Guard students also discussed how they felt like they were not valued during their disruptions because they were convinced the college was unaware of their absence. If their college had developed a tracking and communication system to use with National Guard students when they were away, they would have felt valued by the college. Routine communication from the college would have served two purposes: to keep them engaged with the campus and to show they were valuable members of the learning community (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The National Guard students discussed how if their college had taken the initiative to communicate with them while they were away, they would be more likely to re-enroll at that college. This shows a direct link between university procedure, National Guard experiences, and the need for validation.

Staff members were impacted by validation too, just in a different way than the National Guard students. Staff members discussed how they felt empowered to support National Guard students during the academic disruptions because they had a military support office on campus. The military support office had the expertise to provide relevant guidance and support to the staff members when they were unsure how to proceed with the students. The staff members wanted to help but did not know how to, leaning on the military support office gave them the tools and the confidence to provide clear guidance to National Guard students. Often administrators forget that staff members also want to feel like valued members of the learning community just like students. The expertise and support of the military support office provided the validation needed for the staff members to work with National Guard students during difficult situations.

The use of validation theory with this study made sense for the student group studied and the unique situation that mobilizations present for colleges. The impact of validating experiences and campus and off agents on the experiences of National Guard students during academic disruptions is credible. In the future researchers need to look at expanding validation theory to see what correlation exists between validation and motivation. From the interviews conducted for this study, it was apparent that both campus and off campus agents motivated National Guard students to return to college after the disruption. Would the combination of validation and motivation by campus and off campus agents lead to better college outcomes? Development of an expanded theory involving high impact validating and motivating factors on National Guard students would be beneficial.

## Limitations

The first limitation of this study was that it provided valuable information regarding the experiences of mobilized National Guard students at a one RPU in the South. Their experiences

with academic disruptions due to military mobilizations are important to understand within the greater context of how those experiences impact National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college. This study did not provide information for National Guard students at different types of higher education institutions or in different regions within the United States. It is difficult to prove that the findings of this study are valid without expanding this research out nationwide to different types of institutions and parts of the country. The findings of this study are a helpful starting point for a national discussion but should be viewed carefully for their overall significance.

The second limitation of this study was that it did not provide data regarding whether the academic disruption impacted re-enrollment in college. It discussed the experiences of students during the disruptions and how their college, family, and friends supported them during the phases of mobilization. It discusses the impact of clear guidance and policy on their ability to re-enroll in college after the disruption. The study did not provide data linking or not linking the academic disruptions to negative college outcomes. It is difficult to prove that this study's findings impact the overall issue of academic disruptions and National Guard college outcomes without a national study proving a correlation between the two variables.

The third limitation of this study was that a limited number of National Guard students were interviewed as part of the study. I had a difficult time finding National Guard students who fit the parameters of the study and were willing to be interviewed. In my opinion, part of the issue is that National Guard students are very busy and prioritize what is important to them and being interviewed for a research project is not high on that list. Second, the scope of this study is narrow; the number of students that qualify for it at JSU is minimal. Third, I believe that JSU has lost a lot of National Guard students due to mobilizations or transferring colleges making it very

difficult to track down students who are not active in the college anymore. The combination of these three factors limited the number of students to be interviewed, and this study's findings should be examined through that lens.

**Conclusion**

Members of the National Guard played a vital role in supporting war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hitt et al., 2015). National Guard students encapsulate a population of students who are often overlooked or misunderstood on college campuses. The mobilization of National Guard students in support of our war efforts led to delays in completing degree programs and overall academic instability (Bauman, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Researching the impact of academic disruptions on National Guard students is relevant to the reality of serving in the National Guard in modern times. With many National Guard students being recruited into serving with the promise of post-secondary education funding, it is important to understand how colleges can best support National Guard students during their disruptions and set-up them up for college success when they return home.

Within this context, this study sought to address gaps in the research by focusing on how mobilizations affect the academic stability of National Guard students on college campuses. There exists a dearth of research focused on National Guard students overall and very little has been completed on how higher education institutions mitigate the academic disruptions of National Guard students' military obligations. Evaluating this problem through staff interviews, National Guard student interviews, and JSU policies and procedures provided insight into how to set National Guard students up for positive college outcomes after the disruption. By aligning college policies and procedures, student needs and expectations, and staff member roles a college can positively impact the effects of academic disruptions. By improving current policies and

procedures, leveraging on and off campus relationships, and utilizing technology a college can limit the impact of academic disruptions for National Guard students and ensure these students re-enroll when they return.

Even though this study had some limitations that affected the overall findings, it still provided colleges with valuable information about the experience of mobilized National Guard students. It provided insights into what types of support and communication that National Guard students expect from their colleges when they mobilize. It showed the importance of making the National Guard students feel engaged and valued by their college and how that impacts their decision to re-enroll after the disruption. Most importantly, it provided colleges with some suggestions on support and communication strategies that they can implement if they are struggling to support National Guard students during academic disruptions. If retaining and graduating National Guard students is a priority at your campus, then this study provided some high impact and easily implemented strategies for use at any college in the United States.

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**Appendix A: Interview Protocol Students**

*Introduction*

- Overview of the study
- Introductions
- Ice breakers:
    - What branch of the military are you in?
    - Is this your first experience in the military?
    - What degree program are you in?
    - How far are you into your program?

*General Support*

- What were your expectations about serving in the National Guard?
- Why did you choose the National Guard over serving on active duty?
- What were your expectations about when and how often you would mobilize?
- Tell me about how many times you have mobilized during college, how long you were gone each time, and how long were in college before each occurrence?

*Pre-Mobilization Phase*

- What type of support did your National Guard unit provide once you received your orders?
- What type of support did your family/friends provide once you received your orders?
- What type of support did the university provide once you received your orders?
- Tell me about the experience of leaving your family, friends, and academic life?

*Separation Phase*

- What type of support did your National Guard unit provide once you left?
- What type of support did your family/friends provide once you left?
- What type of support did the university provide once you left?
- How concerned were you with reintegrating with your family, friends, and academic life?

*Return Phase*

- What type of support did your National Guard unit provide once you returned?
- What type of support did your family/friends provide once you returned?
- What type of support did the university provide once you returned?
- Tell me about the experience of reintegrating back into your family, friends, and academic life?

*Wrap-Up*

- Is there anything you thought I should have asked about and did not?
- Do you have any questions for me?

**Appendix B: Recruitment Email Students**

RE: National Guard student experiences with academic disruptions in higher education

Dear "Student Name,"

My name is Justin Parker, I am current doctoral student at St. Cloud State University. I am currently conducting a research study aimed at understanding whether withdrawing from college for at least one semester (academic disruption) due to a military mobilization affects National Guard students' ability to re-enroll and graduate in higher education. I will interview current National Guard students who have experienced at least one semester of academic disruption due to a military mobilization to better understand their experiences of re-enrolling and graduating in college after the disruption.

A military mobilization is defined as a deployment to a war zone or activation in support of a stateside support effort such as hurricane cleanup, tornado cleanup, wildfire support, pandemic support, etc. Activation for monthly drill or yearly training does not qualify. The student must have withdrawn from a semester due to military mobilizations and will not be selected to participate if they withdrew for personal or financial reasons. Participation in this study will require you to sit down for a 30–45-minute interview over Microsoft Teams with the researcher to discuss your experiences withdrawing from college due to a military mobilization.

If you have questions, or would like to participate, please reach out to me at justin.parker@go.stcloudstate.edu.

Justin Parker

Doctoral Student, St. Cloud State University

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol Administrators

*Introduction*

- Overview of the study
- Introductions
- Ice breakers:
  - What is your professional role on campus?
  - Describe your understanding of the military obligations experienced by National Guard students.

*General Support*

- How do you support National Guard students on campus?
- How often do you interact with National Guard students?
- What type of concerns do you routinely hear from National Guard students?

*Pre-Mobilization Phase*

- How does the university support National Guard students when they receive orders to mobilize?
- Does university policy enhance or interfere with your ability to support National Guard students when they receive orders? Explain?
- Does the university provide effective support of National Guard students when they receive orders?
  - What does the university do well?
  - What can the university improve upon?

*Separation Phase*

- How does the university support National Guard students when they are mobilized?
- Does university policy enhance or interfere with your ability to support National Guard students when they are mobilized? Explain?
- Does the university provide effective support of National Guard students when they are mobilized?
  - What does the university do well?
  - What can the university improve upon?

*Return Phase*

- How does the university support National Guard students when they return to school?
- Does university policy enhance or interfere with your ability to support National Guard students when they return to school? Explain?
- Does the university provide effective support of National Guard students when they return to school?
  - What does the university do well?
  - What can the university improve upon?

*Wrap-Up*
- Is there anything you thought I should have asked about and did not?
- Do you have any questions for me?

**Appendix D: Recruitment Email Administrators**

RE: Supporting National Guard students during academic disruptions in higher education

Dear "Administrator Name,"

My name is Justin Parker, I am current doctoral student at St. Cloud State University. I am currently conducting a research study aimed at understanding whether withdrawing from college for at least one semester (academic disruption) due to a military mobilization affects National Guard students' ability to re-enroll in college. I want to interview current JSU administrators who support National Guard students during military mobilizations to better understand how JSU policies and procedures impact students' ability to re-enroll in college after the disruption.

Participation in this study will require you to sit down for a 30–45-minute interview over Microsoft Teams with the researcher to discuss your experiences withdrawing from college due to a military mobilization.

If you have questions, or would like to participate, please reach out to me at justin.parker@go.stcloudstate.edu.

Justin Parker

Doctoral Student, St. Cloud State University

# Appendix E: IRB Approval

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

**720 4th Avenue South AS 101, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498**

August 24, 2023

Justin Parker
Email: justin.parker@go.stcloudstate.edu

Faculty Mentor: Jennifer Jones

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects.

**Project Title:** National Guard Students and Academic Disruptions: A Case Study of How Academic Disruptions Impact College Outcomes

**Your project has been:** Approved

**IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION:** Exempt

**SCSU IRB#:** 52409140

**Please read through the following important information concerning IRB projects.**

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc) by completing an IRB Modification/RevisionequestForm:https://webportalapp.com/webform/irb_modification_request_form
- The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

Feel free to contact the IRB for assistance at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding for expedited response. Additional information can be found on the IRB website https://www.stcloudstate.edu/irb/default.aspx.

Sincerely,
**IRB Chair**:
William Collis-Prather

Program Director
Applied Clinical Research

**IRB Institutional Official:**
Dr. Claudia Tomany

Associate Provost for Research
Dean of Graduate Studies