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COLLEGE**

Christen Duhe
w318005@usm.edu

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF ACTIVE MILITARY AND VETERAN STUDENTS
AT MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Christen H. Duhé

A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
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This Doctoral Project was approved by:

Dr. Masha Krsmanovic
Advisor

Dr. Noal Cochran
Interim Director

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, the estimated veteran population for Mississippi was 200,000–350,000 and the veteran population in the U.S. in 2019 was estimated to be 19,209,704. Of this number, only 910,000 utilized their education benefits (USDVA, 2019). Comparable to national trends, active military members and veterans are not being effectively targeted and recruited to become students at Mississippi community colleges. Moreover, the enrolled military students and veterans were also found to experience more difficulties in higher education than their civilian peers (Smith et al., 2017). The purpose of this research was to identify the strategies for improving the recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. Additionally, this study aimed to identify the support services that can assist with retaining these students through graduation. This qualitative research study took place at MGCCC because of the large military presence in the cities where the college is located. The participants were college employees who have worked or currently work with active military and veteran students, in any capacity. The results showed that all participants were passionate about the active military and veteran student population and were invested in how their college could improve their efforts to help the students succeed. This research portrays the firsthand experience of these employees and their interactions with military and veteran students and discusses valuable implications to aid the college in its efforts to increase student enrollment and retention.

Keywords: military and veteran students, recruitment, enrollment, retention

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DEDICATION

To my younger brother, Chawn. You were the inspiration for this study and I hope you know that we are more than where we came from and our future is up to us. You can do it. I love you.

My friends have always been more like a family to me and their love and support has gotten me through so many things, including this program. I know better than to try and name everyone because I will inadvertently leave someone out, so I will simply say that if you are my friend and you've given me encouragement along the way, this is for you. We can all go to brunch now.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Active military members, veterans, and their families may be eligible to receive benefits to pay for college. These benefits are sufficient to pay for the entire cost of tuition, which would relieve the financial burden of paying for a college degree. These benefits are part of the GI Bill, and there are different tiers of the program depending on the year an individual entered active duty service in the military. The rates for the Post-9/11 GI Bill change each year and for the 2020 academic year, the Post-9/11 GI Bill covered all of the tuition and fee payments for an in-state student to attend a public school, and up to \$25,162.14 to attend a private or foreign school (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [USDVA], 2020). These students may also be eligible to receive a housing allowance, books, and a stipend for other necessary school supplies.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits military service members who served on active duty after September 10, 2001, with some eligibility requirements. The process for attaining the benefits of the GI Bill can be difficult, and military students and veterans who are entering a higher education institution may need additional support from college employees to help navigate the various forms and stipulations that were put into place by the Post- 9/11 GI Bill 9 (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2019).

In 2015, the estimated veteran population for Mississippi was 200,001-350,000 and the population for total veterans in the U.S. in 2019 was estimated to be 19,209,704. Of the estimated 19 million veterans in the U.S. in 2019, only 910,000 utilized their education benefits (USDVA, 2019). These figures illustrate the vast opportunity for colleges to recruit military and veteran students.

There are 15 community colleges in Mississippi, and the second largest is Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). MGCCC is located in the four southernmost

counties: Harrison, Jackson, Stone and George, and has over 10 locations throughout its district. Two of the locations are at military installations; the Naval Construction and Battalion Center (NCBC) and Keesler Air Force Base (KAFB). During the 2018-2019 academic year, MGCCC had 12,236 students enrolled, of which 919 were marked as being a veteran or active military student. In the 2019-2020 academic year, MGCCC had a slight decline in total enrollment and had 12,003 students enrolled, of which 876 were marked as being a veteran or active military student. The military population data is retrieved directly from the student information system and any student that receives educational benefits and is coded as being active military or a veteran will be reflected in the reported numbers. This data demonstrates that each year veteran and active-military enrollment is decreasing at the college.

Statement of the Problem

As evident in the enrollment trends presented, active military members and veterans are not being effectively targeted and recruited to become students at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). In addition to not effectively recruiting this population, the college could increase its efforts to retain the active military and veteran students it does attract. MGCCC has two military bases in its four-county district: Keesler Air Force Base and the Naval Construction Battalion Center (MGCCC, 2020a). The college could grow enrollment and greatly benefit by increasing their recruitment initiatives of this population of potential students. Additional effort is needed to train the employees tasked with retaining this demographic once they become students.

Active military members and veterans receive GI Bill benefits that help pay for college, graduate school, and training programs (U.S. Department of Veterans, 2020). These students have the monetary resources to attend college but their enrollment at MGCCC is very low.

Military veterans represent only 7% of the student population at the institution (MGCCC, 2020b). The college has an opportunity to increase its recruitment efforts of military service members.

Moreover, military students and veterans were also found to experience more difficulties in higher education than their civilian peers (Smith et al., 2017). While MGCCC does have staff at each of their main campuses that specialize in helping military and veteran students, MGCCC could offer more resources to this population. The college has three main campuses: Harrison County Campus, Jackson County Campus, and the Perkinston Campus, but the Military Benefits Processing Center is located on just one of those locations (MGCCC, 2020c). Therefore, the enrollment and retention support of military and veteran students are limited by the fact that campuses do not have their own respective processing centers. These campuses do not have other resources available that assist these students with the paperwork that is required for the GI Bill, how to navigate other financial aid opportunities, as well as behavioral counseling services. Consequently, MGCCC's lack of additional services limits their ability to retain more of their military and veteran students through graduation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the strategies for improving the recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). Additionally, this study aimed to identify the support services that can assist MGCCC with retaining these students through graduation.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How are active military and veterans currently recruited by MGCCC?

2. What support services have MGCCC implemented to better recruit active military and veteran students?
3. What retention strategies have MGCCC implemented in support of their active military and veteran students?

Significance of the Study

This study was designed to provide feedback from MGCCC employees who work, or have worked, directly with active military and veteran students. The firsthand experience of these employees and their interactions with active military and veteran students will provide valuable information to aid the college in its efforts to increase their overall enrollment. This feedback is aimed to empower MGCCC to better serve active military and veteran students by specifying the needs and wants of this population of students in the college's four county district. The data may also help inform local legislators of the need for additional funding to the college to support active military and veteran students. The feedback collected may also help other community colleges in the state determine how to better serve active military and veteran students in their area.

Definition of Terms

Active Military Student. A person employed in the military full time and can be deployed (USDVA, 2020).

Veteran Student. A person who served on active duty, in the Reserves, in the Coast Guard, or in the National Guard and received an honorable or general discharge under honorable conditions (USDVA, 2020).

Assumptions

The study was concluded with assumptions presumed to be true when the study took place. First, it was assumed that the student enrollment data from MGCCC were accurate at the time the study was completed. Second, it is presumed that MGCCC administration is dedicated to increasing enrollment by improving the recruitment efforts and services offered that affect the retention of active military and veteran students. Therefore, the researcher assumes employees currently assisting military and veteran students are actively invested in improving their strategies and services to help recruit and retain active military and veteran students.

Delimitations

This study had several delimitations, which were set by the researcher and describe the scope and bounds of the study. This study was delimited to only one college that included all 10 of its centers and campuses: Harrison County Campus, Jackson County Campus, Perkinston Campus, George County Center, The Bryant Center, West Harrison County Center, Advanced Manufacturing & Technology Center, Haley Reeves Barbour Maritime Training Academy, Keesler Center, and the Naval Construction Battalion Center. Instead of exploring the collective practices of different colleges, this study focused on gathering rich and detailed insights into the practices of one institution.

The sample for this study was delimited to only college employees who currently work, or have previously worked, with military and veteran students. These employees work in the student services division at various campuses and centers of the college, business services, institutional relations, and teaching and learning. The study is also further delimited by utilizing only two years of enrollment data. Instead of retrieving enrollment data from previous years to provide a broader snapshot of military enrollment at the college, only two years were analyzed.

Limitations

This study had limitations that were outside the control of the researcher. These limitations could potentially affect the generalizability and applicability of the results of this study. One limitation is that the college differs across departments in how they code active military and veteran students. The other limitation is that the results from this study are specific to MGCCC, and may not be generalizable for all colleges in Mississippi.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies for improving the recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at MGCCC, as well as identify the support services that can assist MGCCC with retaining these students through graduation. The intended significance of this study is reflected in the need for MGCCC to increase the overall enrollment of this student group. The following sections of this capstone project highlight the contemporary findings about active military and veteran students illustrating how this study can assist MGCCC in effectively implementing new strategies to recruit and retain this population of students.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research study was to identify the strategies for improving the recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). Additionally, this study aimed to identify the support services that can assist MGCCC with retaining these students through graduation.

There are 15 community colleges in Mississippi and each must adhere to rules put forth by the Mississippi Community College Board in terms of how they recruit students. Except for the recruitment of athletes, each community college is prohibited from participating in recruitment events or other activities outside of its district. This policy also means that each community college cannot advertise outside of their district. MGCCC has locations in four counties that make up its district: George, Harrison, Jackson, and Stone.

The studies evaluated for this literature revealed that there was limited research found on how colleges recruit this population of students. Mentzer et al. (2015) identified the special needs of military students and found that academic and institutional support, in addition to other factors, played a role in retaining this population. It is feasible to assume that military students would also require a more targeted approach by colleges that outline how they focus on this population's special needs. This research has been conducted to determine what strategies and tactics MGCCC should perform to recruit this population.

Recruitment Strategies in Higher Education

To better understand how colleges and universities should recruit active military and veteran students, prior research on general recruitment practices by these institutions was examined. If colleges and universities use certain strategies to recruit other types of students, perhaps they could alter those strategies to apply to active military and veteran students.

In reviewing previous literature regarding overall recruitment strategies by institutions of higher learning, one common theme was the appearance of diversity among students. Diversity extends beyond race and includes gender, and different social and economic backgrounds. When potential students see other students who look like them, or have some shared experiences as them, are enrolled at a college they are considering to attend, it could help to influence their decision (Howard & Davies, 2013). Institutions of higher learning aim to demonstrate to potential students that the students have a “shared identity with other students based on social and cultural backgrounds, norms, values and beliefs” (Howard & Davies, 2013, p. 780). Students who feel like they would belong and fit in at an institution of higher learning because of other students who already attend, could make the transition to college an easier one.

Bock et al. (2014) acknowledged that higher education marketing should incorporate a segmentation strategy to be more successful in recruiting students. Segmenting potential students into different groups based on their diverse backgrounds and interests could help institutions of higher learning target and recruit students because the messages and strategies they use would be tailored specifically to each group (Bock et al., 2014). For example, potential students that are recent high school graduates and potential students who have been out of high school for a decade will require different recruitment strategies. Those two groups would be divided into different segments for which a college or university would have to develop specific strategies in order to recruit them to their institution. If institutions of higher learning used segmentation strategies they would be more competitive (Bock et al., 2014).

In today’s world, technology plays a large role in how people receive information. College websites are no exception, and potential students may look to an institution of higher learning’s website to research and find information (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). Because

of the lack of research surrounding institutions of higher learning and whether their use of diversity strategies play a role in students' choice in enrollment, Ihme et al. (2016) specifically targeted the use of diversity on college websites in their study. Viewing a college's website may be the first time a potential student is exposed to an institution of higher learning, and it is for this reason that colleges have focused on using their websites as a recruitment tool (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). Websites may feature photographs of student life, student testimonials, and extensive information on programs offered at institutions of higher learning. The website of an institution of higher learning has to incorporate information for a wide range of publics, beyond potential students, such as employees, alumni, current students, donors, and general members of the community (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009).

The website for an institution of higher learning plays a multitude of roles due to the wide variety of key publics, which may make it difficult for the institution to effectively market to and recruit potential students. Displaying different types of students and programs on a college's website does affect their enrollment and Ihme et al. (2016) established that, "when applicants are faced with the decision to choose between two equally excellent programs or institutions, their social identity concerns may tip their decision" (p. 1024). It is advantageous for institutions of higher learning to invest in the time to review their websites to determine if the images and content that are displayed are in line with the different segments of students they are attempting to recruit.

The research surrounding the overall recruitment strategies for institutions of higher learning emphasized diversity. Institutions of higher learning could utilize some of the diversity strategies discussed in this section such as segmentation and including military members and other content on their websites to appeal to active military and veteran students.

Needs of Military and Veteran Students

To determine how to effectively recruit and retain active military and veteran students, prior research on this population was studied and analyzed. Karp and Klempin (2016) found that active military and veteran students would benefit from having one office devoted to their needs, versus having multiple destinations that these students would have to visit for counseling, financial aid, benefits, and other services. Karp and Klempin (2016) acknowledged that “military veteran students appreciate, use, and benefit from streamlined and veteran-focused services” (p. 3). Prior to 2020, MGCCC had military centers at its three main campuses: Harrison County Campus, Jackson County Campus, and Perkinston Campus. The centers provided some services that military students and veterans required but they were not a true full-service office for these students.

In addition to having a full-service office on campus that would provide a more streamlined approach to assist military and veteran students, researchers found that this population would also benefit from gaining access to affordable housing and counseling services (Oswald et al., 2019). The college could have an area in their full-service office with information that would be relevant to active military and veteran students. Through relationships with local realtor organizations and chambers of commerce, the college could supply listings for affordable housing and counseling in the area.

Mental health needs associated with this population should be a priority for institutions of higher learning. Because of the experiences these students had while serving in the military, they may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as other mental health issues (Miller, 2015). Current counseling offered by the college may need to be supplemented to accommodate the needs of active military and veteran students as this population may face

challenges acclimating to the college environment (Bonar, 2016). Active military and veteran students may need additional counseling support than their civilian counterparts, as they were found to be more likely to have trauma (Smith et al., 2017). Additional counseling support may be integrated into an office designated for military and veteran students, or it may be an intervention that a college or university outsourced to local Veteran Affairs offices if they were unable to sufficiently staff this type of position. De La Garza et al. (2016) suggested that, “Veteran Affairs offices on campus should consider designing and using counseling-based interventions to communicate to student veterans that they possess the ability to complete studies based on the strength of character required, gained, and instilled through military service” (p. 51).

Military and veteran students learn certain life skills and training from the military that prepare them for the responsibility of higher education, but they need assistance from higher education institutions to efficiently transfer to a new lifestyle outside of the military. Stone (2017) noted that this population may have a hard time acclimating to the more relaxed environment of higher education than that of their strict military background. The skills and training that this population attained through their military service make them more advanced than the traditional students enrolled in higher education, and college employees could better serve these students by changing their communication style and how they interact with this population (Stone, 2017). Additionally, Miller’s (2015) research results indicated that the most common characteristic among academic advisors who work with this population was empathy. It follows then, that active military and veteran students need a different approach to how they are communicated to, and also need to be shown empathy in order to better adapt to the college lifestyle.

In order to equip college employees with the tools they need to interact and support active military and veteran students when this population is making the decision to attend college, institutions of higher learning could require employees to take professional development courses geared towards the needs of active military and veteran students. Instructors should be trained so that they are prepared to meet the needs of military-connected students and answer any questions this population has (Trimillos, 2018).

This section discussed the specific needs of active military and veteran students and how institutions of higher learning could positively impact this population by identifying areas of improvement and implementing changes. Sansone and Segura (2020) further documented that, while this population may struggle to fit into higher education after their time in the military, they persevere. Their research placed emphasis on how institutions of higher learning embraced adapting to the unique needs of this student group. The knowledge gained through prior research successfully identified the special needs of active military and veteran students that institutions of higher learning can transfer into recruitment practices. Once this population is enrolled, institutions of higher learning will need to continue to meet their needs and execute practices that will aid in retaining these students through graduation.

Retention of Military and Veteran Students

In this section, evidence is provided that outlines actions that colleges and universities should take to retain active military and veteran students. As the previous section highlighted, this population has special needs that colleges should take into consideration by implementing carefully designed and targeted practices aimed to help these students be successful in their educational journey.

Once a college has recruited an active military or veteran student, they must provide resources to support their unique needs in order to retain them through graduation. In that regard, Mentzer et al. (2015) discussed various approaches that colleges could take to support this population. Academic support, in particular, was identified as a highly effective intervention in promoting the success of this student group. Next, it is important to note that, once active military and veteran students have enrolled at a college, the support they require transcends beyond only one supporting office. Mentzer et al. (2015) established that this group particularly benefitted from a more stringent organization in regards to their class structure, and strong faculty engagement. As the relationships with college employees also benefitted active military and veteran students, institutions of higher learning should invest time and resources into training employees on how to interact with this population (Bonar, 2016).

Providing professional development opportunities to all college employees that concentrated on assisting military and veteran students in overcoming their academic challenges and obstacles could benefit both the students and the employees (Trimillos, 2018). The more information available to college employees, the better equipped they would be to develop more empathy for students, which has already been identified as an important characteristic for employees to have when working with this student group (Trimillos, 2018).

The importance of academic support for active military and veteran students was further highlighted in the research by De La Garza et al. (2016) and Williams-Klotz and Ganzemer-Topf (2017). Specifically, having employees who are aware of the special needs of this population could aid in the academic success of active military and veteran students (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). While their research hones in on specific departments such as student

affairs or veterans' affairs offices, other areas of the college could also benefit from understanding their needs.

In the previous section, one of the needs of active military and veteran students discussed was access to counseling for mental health. While mental health is important to these students, it is also critical for college employees to recognize other support systems that can assist this population. The presented findings from the contemporary scholarship allow one to deduce that, if college employees are not trained and informed about all the special needs of active military and veteran students, they may not be aware of other support systems and services outside of mental health needs (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2018). Institutions of higher learning could gather from Cavendish's (2017) study that they may benefit from offering a special orientation for military and veteran students that focuses on shortfalls from the military transition training.

An enhanced advising plan for active military and veteran students is one way that colleges could provide academic support. This population could benefit from a more in-depth meeting schedule with their advisors. While students typically meet with their advisors once a semester to determine what classes they should take the following semester, active military and veteran students may benefit from "high-touch advising practices" (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2019, p.766). This argument was further supported by De La Garza et al. (2016) who suggested more intimate meetings with this population and their advisors, and more frequently than once a semester.

In addition to a more intense advising process for active military and veteran students, research found that other practices could also help with academic support. Creating tutoring groups for active military and veteran students promoted academic success (Williams-Klotz &

Gansemer-Topf, 2017). The tutoring groups would be made up of other military students, as well as instructors who have been properly trained to assist with this population of students.

Special orientation sessions, better advising, and tutoring are directly tied to academics, but there are other ways that institutions of higher learning can support these students and their academic success. For instance, many informal ways of support were found to facilitate academic progress for this student group. De La Garza et al. (2016) suggested that Veterans Affairs offices at institutions of higher learning host, “student veteran social events and receptions where recent veteran graduates and alumni can interact with military and veteran students in both group and individual settings” (p. 52). By creating a venue for these groups to connect, the current active military and veteran students are given an opportunity to ask questions and gain insight into how to properly navigate their higher education path, which could result in academic success.

If students are better prepared at their community college once they are enrolled and if they receive proper attention in the strategically targeted areas, they have a higher chance of being retained through graduation and transferring to a university (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2019). They would also be better equipped to enter the workforce if transferring to a university was not their goal.

The findings from previous research that were described in this section outlined several ways in which institutions of higher learning could support active military and veteran students and promote their retention. More work is needed to keep this population enrolled through graduation. Colleges should focus not only on this population’s mental health needs, but also on their overall academic needs.

Alternatively, research done by Sansone and Segura (2020) contradicts the existing literature on active military and veteran students and their transition into higher education and retention. In relation to retaining active military and veteran students through graduation, Sansone and Segura (2020) discovered that this population of students were no different from non-veteran students in terms of their, “likelihood of stopping out or graduating” (p. 908-909). Active military and veteran students related closely to the general non-traditional student population and in order to better understand them and their needs, the active military and veteran student population should not be compared to the first-time student population in relation to recruitment or retention (Sansone & Segura, 2020). While the research of Sansone and Segura (2020) did support the idea that more scholarship is needed to fully understand active military and veteran students and their needs, they did not investigate environmental predictors of the institution and focused more on student development. Even though their findings differ from the dominant scholarship on active military and veteran student population, their research provided important insights into subtle distinctions and nuances of understanding this student group.

As previously discussed in this section, academic support and mental health support, should be an increased focus of the institutions of higher learning aiming to better serve their active military and veteran student population. Colleges and universities should also consider the similarities that this population has with other non-traditional students and the influence institutions have over their retention by the environment they created for these students, their policies, and services offered (Sansone & Segura, 2020).

Conclusion

The findings represented in this literature review describe the multitude of needs of active military and veteran students who are making the transition into higher education. Full-service

offices, as well as counseling services for mental health, are important resources that this population would benefit from and could help the institutions of higher learning recruit active military and veteran students to attend a particular college. The research presented in this review also illustrated that student retention could be achieved by focusing on academic support services and providing professional development opportunities to all college employees to help them better understand active military and veteran students. Overall student recruitment and retention efforts by institutions of higher learning were also researched and the strategies employed by institutions of higher learning for the general student population may also be used for the active military and veteran student population.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

At Mississippi Gulf Community College (MGCCC) in 2020, veterans accounted for 7% of the overall student population (MGCCC, 2020). As revealed in the literature review, active military and veteran students have specialized needs and wants from colleges and universities. The previous research showed that offering full-service offices that catered to active military and veteran students could have a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of this population.

To determine what programs and changes would positively affect the recruitment and retention of active military and veteran students at MGCCC, the researcher identified key questions to guide the research. The purpose of the study was to identify the strategies for improving the recruitment practices for this population, as well as to identify the support services that can assist MGCCC with retaining these students through graduation. The methodology used for this research was guided by these questions:

1. How are active military and veterans currently recruited by MGCCC?
2. What support services have MGCCC implemented to better recruit active military and veteran students?
3. What retention strategies have MGCCC implemented in support of their active military and veteran students?

Research Design

In this study, the researcher used qualitative, phenomenological research design. This qualitative research design was chosen because the researcher wanted the sample to be purposeful and in phenomenological research, the participants need to be able to, “articulate their lived experiences” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 104). Through individual interviews, the participants shared their real-world experiences with active military and veteran students. As Padilla-Diaz

(2015) outlined, interviews are key to phenomenological research and allow the researcher to attain knowledge from the research participants and give the researcher a more detailed description of the study matter.

Setting, Population, and Participants

The study took place at MGCCC and this setting was chosen because of the large military presence in the cities where the college is located. MGCCC is located in Stone, Harrison, George, and Jackson counties, and has 10 locations of which two of the locations are on military bases. Students who attend MGCCC can receive an associate of arts degree, an associate of science degree, and an associate of applied science degree.

The population for this study consisted of all MGCCC employees. Employees were selected to participate in the study if they have worked or currently work with active military and veteran students, in any capacity. If employees had not worked with active military and veteran students they were not considered to participate in the study.

The study had 13 participants made up of administrators, faculty, and staff members from MGCCC who volunteered to share their perspectives and experiences with active military and veteran students and how the college attempts to recruit and retain this population. Interview participants represented individuals from the following departments: student services, business services, teaching and learning, and institutional relations. The sample consisted of eight females and five males. Eight of the participants were administrators, three were staff members, and two were faculty members. The sample consisted of 10 participants who identified as White and three who identified as Black. The years of experience working with active military and veteran students ranged from two and half years to 16 years.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through individual interviews via Zoom. This instrument was chosen so that the researcher could have more intimate conversations with the college employees who have had or currently have experience working with active military and veteran students. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that qualitative research allows one to, “achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 15). Through interviews, the researcher was able to have a better understanding of the active military and veteran student population as seen through the eyes of the college employees involved in the study.

The interview guide consisted of 19 open ended questions. One portion focused on the employees’ perceptions of the college’s recruitment efforts of active military and veteran students. Another portion of the interview guide focused on the employees’ perceptions for the college’s retention efforts of active military and veteran students. The last portion concentrated on the types of services the college offered to that student population and the ideas they might have on what other services the college could provide to those students.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in August 2021 (Appendix A). Following the receipt of the IRB’s approval, participants were contacted via email after the researcher acquired the employees’ email addresses through the college’s public website. The participants were recruited for the study between August and September of 2021 and were all asked to complete a consent form. The interviews were conducted in November of 2021. The interviews were less than three hours in length and took place virtually.. Signed consent forms were returned to the researcher prior to the interviews.

The researcher conducted the virtual interviews and the information collected was recorded by taking notes and recording the interviews using an electronic recording device. Transcriptions were created from the notes taken during the interviews and/or recordings of the interviews. The participants' names were not used or made public and were pseudonymized, with names chosen by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic coding, or the process of “labeling and thus analyzing portions of data with an extended thematic statement rather than a shorter code,” (Saldana, 2012, p. 175). The data analysis process involved identifying the commonalities in participants' responses and categorizing them into broad topics. The data were placed into four different themes.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methodology that was used to answer the research questions. The research was used to identify new strategies for improving the recruitment and retention practices for active military and veterans at MGCCC. These data were analyzed to determine what types of programs and services would be beneficial to the college to aid with increasing the enrollment of this population, as well as how the college could retain the population through graduation. Chapter Four provides the findings for the study.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from interviews with 13 administrators, faculty, and staff members from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) who volunteered to share their perspectives and experiences with active military and veteran students and how the college attempts to recruit and retain this population. Interview participants represented individuals from the following departments: student services, business services, teaching and learning, and institutional relations. The sample consisted of eight females and five males. Eight of the participants were administrators, three were staff members, and two were faculty members. The sample consisted of 10 participants who identified as White and three who identified as Black. The years of experience working with active military and veteran students ranged from two and half years to 16 years.

The results of this study revealed the following themes in relation to administrators, staff members, and faculty members envisioning how MGCCC can improve their efforts in the recruitment and retention of active military and veteran students: (1) understanding of this unique population, (2) recognition of barriers, (3) increasing staffing and administrative support, and (4) implementing partnerships with various active military and veteran groups. As this study portrayed the perspectives of 13 participants, not all were represented in the quotes. Those narratives that were not portrayed in the quotes echoed the viewpoints and stances of their colleagues.

The Unique Population of Active Military and Veteran Students

A majority of the participants discussed the unique nature of active military and veteran students and how they differ from both the traditional and non-traditional students at the college. Active military and veteran students are grouped into the non-traditional population at MGCCC,

and a majority of the participants expressed the need for these students to be put into their own student group. Phoebe Winter, one of the student services participants, explained when discussing the recruitment materials the college uses:

They are a unique population and that's one thing I've been trying to do during my time here is to explain that everyone is unique, different ideas are going to pull them in more than just a general population. I believe we could add something that we welcome our military to our commercials and brochures. Just updating things, like that would be, I think, helpful in recruiting students because they're getting accurate information that way, and being familiar with their needs. (Student Services employee)

Blake Reynolds, a business services participant, agreed with increasing the presence of military in recruitment materials and said that "there needs to be more marketing geared towards military students and their spouses and the military friendly designation." Many of the participants touted the college's military friendly designation but expressed they felt the college did not use it enough to recruit the population. Overall, they felt that the college needed to do more targeted advertising to this unique population. Joe Wynn, one of the student services participants, stated that the college needed to "make them a target like we do with the traditional 18-year-old population."

When discussing the recruitment and retention efforts put forth by the college, one of the instructors, Harry McGraw, said that to be effective: "A big thing is knowing that particular population and treating them differently," alluding to the different nature of the unique nature of active military and veteran students and how they differ from the tradition and non-traditional populations. Wynn went as far as to say that the college should create a retention and recruiting

plan just for active military and veteran students to tie in with the college's existing strategic plan.

Some of the participants described the experiences that active military and veteran students have had that contribute to their unique needs. Jake Gillian, one of the student services participants explained:

A lot of time these individuals, you know, they come in from being active in war, to different things like that. So, we have to make sure that we have the mental health resources in place as well, to be able to retain them. And make sure that we have LPC services available on each campus as it has been proven to be very beneficial to that population of students. Make sure that those students have that contact person, because let's face it, I mean, a lot of times, these are adults who've been off to war, and they're coming back and they don't want to get the run around, they don't want to get pushed to this office or to that office, they want a single contact person.

Several of the participants mentioned the specific culture of the military and how it has lasting impacts on active military and veteran service members. Ed Dessner, a student services participant, said the way MGCCC interacts with this population may be "counterintuitive to military culture." The structured nature of the military is very different from how the college filters students through the enrollment process. Dessner said:

I think we [MGCCC] get in the habit of looking at enrollment and treating enrollment as one big block that has to be moved or one needle that has to move and it takes that somebody looking at how the special population operates to understand how you approach them.

Two of the participants want MGCCC to make it mandatory for military students to

attend a special orientation session as well as for military students to be required to be advised prior to taking classes. Phoebe Winter explained:

So, when it comes to military, if they're not getting advisement then you're going to lose them halfway through. Military students come in with PTSD, they've been told when to eat, when to sleep, when to do everything. Now, all of a sudden, we're telling them to take off and do what they want. You don't advise a regular student like a military student. They have to follow specific guidelines.

Dessner discussed the negative impact that effects military students when they are not advised. They explained the benefits the students receive from the VA and how if they do not follow guidelines they can end up losing money. He said:

We know that if we drop them [military students] without counseling them, they may lose benefits and incur a big debt. I've seen students that have come to us and everything's paid for and they get this living stipend. Then, because they don't understand the drop policy relative to the military, and I'd argue that we don't have a drop policy for the military, we have a drop practice- these students suffer.

Barriers for Active Military and Veteran Students

The second theme that emerged from employee responses were the various barriers the college encounters when serving or attempting to serve active military and veteran students. As discussed in the first theme, this population is unique, and their uniqueness also results in a separate set of barriers the college has to face compared to the traditional and non-traditional populations they attempt to recruit. As Reynolds explained: "One of the main barriers with recruiting is the rules and regulations on the military bases because it's so strict to market out there because of their guidelines". The participant went on to say, "You have to try to capture

them [active military members] essentially, outside of their normal environment and they spend most of their time on base.”

As interviewees further discussed, another barrier that the college encounters when trying to recruit this population is the frequent change of leadership at the local military bases. The leadership at the bases sometimes changes each year, whereas leadership at the surrounding high schools typically remains in place for much longer allowing the college to develop long-lasting relationships with school leaders. Joe Wynn said, “I know the base commanders have changed a couple of times, so maybe it’s time to reintroduce ourselves.”

Another barrier that was discussed by interviewees was the lack of resources available for the college to utilize compared to what they are given when recruiting the traditional population. Several of the interviewees mentioned the data MGCCC receives from local schools, and they also discussed how the college is allowed to visit the schools to recruit students. One of the business services participants, Selena Jack, explained:

You know, we can send postcards and things to high school seniors because we can get their information from public institutions or public K through 12 or private K through 12. I don’t know that there’s actually a repository for active military members. I don’t think they’re [military bases] allowed to send us a list of their active duty military that are currently stationed on their bases.

Another barrier that affects the college’s relationship with active military and veteran students are the various changes that occur within in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the benefits offered to active military and veterans. Betty Ryan, a student services participant said "The VA changes a lot. There’re different processes that change every semester. So, trying

to keep all the enrollment specialists up to date on those changes so they won't negatively affect our military has been a challenge."

As outlined in this theme, the changes within the VA system create a barrier that ties into the next theme of increasing staffing and administrative support at all of the college's main campuses to assist active military and veteran students. The changes are passed on to the enrollment specialists, but as the interviewees discussed, those employees are for all types of students and there is no one committed to the military population. The challenge that Betty Ryan detailed above may be eliminated if there were dedicated personnel who could keep up with the changes within the VA system.

Increased Staffing and Administrative Support

Nine of the 13 participants cited the need for the military service centers to be reinstated at the college's three main campuses. The college recently changed their internal structure and went from having a military service center on each of the main campuses to having one processing center at its Jackson County Campus. The participants voiced their concerns with grouping the active military and veteran student population in with other populations and no longer offering them a more personalized experience when they are on campus. Taylor Sheeran, one of the student services participants, stated:

They [MGCCC] had a school certifying official for each campus that was certifying the veterans for each campus. So, it kept it very personalized. It helped you keep an open dialogue. You have a working relationship and when you're dealing with veterans' money, they need to have that one on one and that has been taken away with just having the processing center now.

Sheeran also went on to say that the relationship with this population, “needs to be specialized. You need to have someone who is specialized for that one-on-one focus.”

The participants also expressed their concerns with the changes in the VA processes as mentioned in the previous theme and how the lack of a military center on the college’s main campus is negatively impacting this population. Sheeran explained the new process:

Well, now that we’ve gone to one processing center, and it’s being processed by three people or two people now, sometimes one, there has been a gap in making certain that those students even though they’ve met with their advisor, there’s still room for error. Phoebe Winter said, “If anything, we took services away by making the one processing center and taken away all the interaction with one group.”

The need for military services representation at all of the main campuses was something that most of the participants thought the college desperately needed. Harry McGraw also expressed their concerns with no longer having a military center for students, specifically at the Harrison County Campus:

I think having that office was big. I probably have about 10% of my student population as veteran or active duty and some of them were in and out of that office on a constant basis. And I think having that access at this campus and not just remotely would be a huge benefit. I think that bringing back that one office would be the biggest thing that the college could do or are least having a representative here to answer questions. Maybe not five days a week, but two or three days a week.

The instructor also mentioned the lack of communication to employees when the military office was closed. Some of the other participants were also not aware that the college had moved to one processing center.

While a majority of the participants suggested the college reopen the military centers at the campuses, Blake Reynolds discussed one of the services that was offered through the military office that was not effective. Reynolds said, “We had a veterans lounge and we didn’t have many people that would utilize it.” They also went on to say that not having the military center offices at the campuses was a “100% negative thing.”

When discussing the need for additional support, several of the participants suggested the college create a steering committee to determine how to best serve active military and veteran students. They emphasized the need for college employees to have a better understanding of the military culture. Inez James, one of the student services participants, said, “The college needs an interdepartmental committee that involves student services, teaching and learning, and all the different departments to come together to identify what services we need.” In regards to retaining this population, Blake Reynolds noted, “Institution-wide support would require multiple departments to meet to know the needs of how to help these students.”

A couple of the participants mentioned the college’s strategic plan, *Excelerate 2030*, and how a section for military students could be added into the plan. Joe Wynn suggested that the college create an additional piece that focuses primarily on the active duty and veteran student population. Wynn said:

I love our strategic plan. But in situations like this, it’s a little too broad and really narrowing a roadmap for the students might be beneficial, like a supplemental area to the strategic plan that was just geared towards military. Create a retention and recruiting plan just for the students but based off of our four pillars.

Increased training for employees was also suggested by many of the participants as a way

for the college to improve their efforts and offer more support with active military and veteran students. Blake Reynolds suggested, “general employee development sessions to let people know the benefits of military students.” Betty Ryan mentioned, “We’re trying to do more employee development for the enrollment specialists, so they know the certain processes for military students.” They suggested the college extend training beyond the enrollment specialists and offered training sessions to all employees. Ryan explained:

I think getting out the information to all employees, especially starting with our student support reps, because that’s kind of the first contact that anybody has with any of our students. All of this information is now falling on us more than a veteran specific office. We just need to do better at educating us on how we need to treat military.

Partnerships with Active Military and Veteran Groups

Many of the participants mentioned the college’s partnerships with local high schools, universities, and local businesses, and suggested ways that MGCCC could partner with active military and veteran groups to learn more about the needs of this population. A few participants mentioned a new veterans student club that was active on the college’s three main campuses and Blake Reynolds said, “I think that it would help to do a roundtable discussion with some current active duty members along with partners to see what they need.” Betty Ryan elaborated on the student veterans’ group by saying:

I think the formation of the student veterans club is a good way to help with retaining these students. We want military students to know that even though they’re coming back, they still have a support system strictly dedicated to military members, their dependents, and their spouses.

Ryan shared that it was difficult to get military students involved in campus activities because they had their own lives outside of school. They said, “They have a whole other life, their family, career, military obligations.” Ed Dessner suggested the college partner with the student veterans club to have a focus group or to conduct a survey. They suggested:

Let the students tell us what’s working, what’s not working. There are all kinds of surveys out there the college is giving and we do have data structures to be able to type these students so I think if we targeted those students in terms of asking them the kinds of questions and holding those focus groups with them, they could tell us if we’re missing the boat.

Several of the participants mentioned the college’s various Veterans Day activities at the different campuses and how these events help celebrate our active military and veteran students. Betty Ryan commented on the celebrations that are held each year and said, “After Veterans Day, it kind of falls off as far as celebrating and having dedications towards military so I think we need to do that more often throughout the year.” Ryan hopes that the new student veterans club will be instrumental with implementing monthly programs or events to recognize the military population

The college already has partnerships with Keesler Airforce Base and the Navy Construction Battalion Center and has an office on each base. Renee Redd, one of the institutional relations participants, mentioned the job fairs that the bases hold for military members and how the college could expand their partnership with the bases by co-hosting these events:

We [MGCCC] should be out there anytime the military has a job fair on base. They're looking for occupations, and we can be out there showing them these great programs. We have a lot of free programs that we can emphasize to them.

Summary

All of the 13 participants were passionate about the active military and veteran student population and were invested in how MGCCC could improve their efforts to help the students succeed. The main theme expressed by the participants was the uniqueness of these students, which led to the other three themes presented in this chapter. Their uniqueness is the catalyst that leads to the various barriers the college faces when trying to recruit and retain them. The participants expressed concern with the removal of the military offices on the campuses and felt there was a need for additional positions to create a more personalized experience for this population. Additionally, they shared the belief that forming new relationships, or building new partnerships with local businesses, industry, and student groups would ultimately create a better environment for active military and veteran students.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The institutional data guiding this research have demonstrated that the veteran and active-military population has declined in enrollment over the past few years at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC). The college's position in the four southernmost counties in the state place the college in a convenient location to two military installations: the Naval Construction and Battalion Center (NCBC) in Gulfport and Keesler Air Force Base (KAFB) in Biloxi. The college also has an office at each of the military installations, making up two of the 10 locations of MGCCC.

This study aimed to identify strategies and tactics the college could implement to improve their recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at MGCCC. The study also sought to identify support services that could be beneficial in retaining this population through graduation. Given the proximity of the college to two military installations, the researcher posited that MGCCC was not being effective in targeting and recruiting this population to become students at the college and that more could be done to increase the enrollment of this population.

The first question of the study was to determine how active military and veteran students were being recruited by MGCCC. The second question was focused on the types of support services the college had implemented to better recruit the population. The last question the study asked was what types of retention strategies MGCCC implemented to support active military and veteran students. Smith et al. (2017) acknowledged that military students and veterans were found to experience more difficulties in higher education than their civilian peers and this study intended to discover how MGCCC could better serve this population of students.

By collecting feedback from MGCCC employees who currently work, or have previously worked with active military and veteran students, this study provides insight into how the college can better interact with this population to increase their overall recruitment and retention of these students. The data collected is also beneficial to other community colleges and universities in their efforts to recruit and retain this population. Furthermore, the findings may educate local and statewide legislators of the intricacies of this unique population and the importance of funding for specialized services to help active military and veteran students.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study and how they correlate with previous literature found on the topic. Limitations of the study are also discussed, as well as implications and suggestions on how MGCCC can utilize the data to improve its recruitment and retention efforts for active military and veteran students.

Discussion

This qualitative study sought to discover how MGCCC could improve their recruitment and retention practices for active military and veteran students. The study found four themes after interviewing 13 administrators, staff members, and faculty members that currently or previously worked with active military and veteran students at MGCCC. The themes were: (1) understanding of this unique population, (2) recognition of barriers, (3) increasing staffing and administrative support, and (4) implementing partnerships with active military and veteran groups.

This study confirms previous research done by Bock et al. (2014) that acknowledged higher education marketing should incorporate a segmentation strategy to be more successful in recruiting students. Participants in this study communicated that active military and veteran students be placed into their own student group for institutional recruitment and retention efforts,

as opposed to being included in a broad non-traditional population. Placing these students into their own group could help MGCCC better recruit this population because the messages and strategies they use would be tailored to active military and veterans (Bock et al., 2014).

These results reflect those of Ihme et al. (2016) who also found that featuring different types of students and programs on a college's website positively affected enrollment. The participants in this study suggested the college increases the presence of military in recruitment materials, and the college's website is one of the main marketing channels utilized for recruitment.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study was its confirmation of Karp and Kemplin's (2016) research that found military and veteran students would benefit from having one office devoted to their needs. Nine of the 13 participants in this study expressed a desire for the college to reinstate military service centers at each of the main campuses. Military veteran students prefer a more streamlined system (Karp & Klempin, 2016).

This study also confirms research done by Stone (2017) who found that active military and veteran students may benefit from college employees changing their communication style and how they interact with this population. Participants in this study recommended that MGCCC increase training for employees to help them better understand this unique population. This study also supports research from Trimillos (2018) who believed instructors should be trained so that they could better meet the needs of military-connected students.

Limitations

This study had two limitations that were beyond the control of the researcher. The first limitation is that the college differs across departments in how they code military and veteran students. This approach could result in some students not being labeled correctly in the college

system, which would affect the enrollment percentage of active military and veteran students. The second limitation was that the study was limited to a single community college in Mississippi. The results from the study are specific to MGCCC and may not be generalizable to all colleges in Mississippi or beyond.

While this qualitative study identified ways that college employees believed could improve the college's recruitment and retention efforts with active military and veteran students, future quantitative research is needed to determine the variables that impact active military and veteran students in their enrollment decisions. Quantitative data could also be used to outline what types of services this population deems important to aid in their retention through graduation. Future investigations should include other community colleges in the state, as well as four-year universities that would allow for a broader group of participants. Lastly, this study only included feedback from employees, so future research is needed to capture the perspectives of active military and veteran students.

Implications

The results of this study research that MGCCC can implement several low-cost initiatives to better recruit and retain active military and veteran students. Including this population in promotional materials, such as the website, social media, specialized brochures, and other pieces, may have a direct impact on enrolling more of these students. The college also currently has an employee development program and could add a session that informs employees of the special needs and experiences of military students, as well as another session that explains the benefits available to this population. Having more employees who are aware of and have a better understanding of this unique population of students could have a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of these students.

The evidence from this study suggests that the college should reinstate the military service centers that were on the three main campuses prior to 2020. This undertaking may be limited by funding and budgetary constraints, but the feelings of the participants were that these offices helped develop a more personalized relationship with active military and veteran students. Also, as previous research stated, this population appreciates a more streamlined approach. The participants felt that the college took services away from this population rather than giving them more resources to be successful.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the strategies for improving the recruitment practices for active military members and veterans at MGCCC, as well as to identify support services that could assist with retaining these students through graduation. The participants of the study provided adequate information and suggestions on how the college could better interact with this population. Many of the ideas presented were cost-effective and moderately straightforward to implement, with the reinstatement of military service offices at each of the main campuses being the exception. The college has a strong relationship with the military community, receiving the Military Friendly and Military Friendly Spouse designation in previous years, but as evidenced from this study, more can be done to have a positive impact on this segment of the community.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-285

PROJECT TITLE: Recruitment and Retention of Active Military and Veteran Students Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Educational Research and Admin

RESEARCHER(S): Christen Duhe, Masha Krsmanovic

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: August 4, 2021

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chairperson

