Meeting the Higher Education Needs of Okinawa-Based U.S. Marines

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by
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Abstract

The transition of a service member from the military to life as a civilian is a transformational process that takes place each day for the men and women serving in the armed forces. This transition is even more challenging when a service member decides to return to college after four years of serving as a U.S. Marine. There is a gap in research to determine what military services can do to help prepare service members prior to their transition to become student veterans at institutions of higher education. Due to this gap, the primary and secondary research questions that frame this research focus on determining how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program can best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education, as well as how military training and experiences, education, career, and transition services and counseling prepare Marines for this transition.

Two theoretical frameworks were utilized to further the understanding of the transition experiences of Marines preparing to become college students – Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research design addressed the research questions. This research design allowed Marines to share their lived experiences in their transition process through surveys and a focus group.

The findings of this research conclude that the military services’ Voluntary Education Programs’ role in the preparation of service members’ transition to college campuses is an important one and that there is a need to further investigate the existing programs that provide education, transition information and services to Marines on Okinawa, as well as to service members worldwide. The military services’ acceptance of what research reveals to create additional and timely services for transitioning service members and to afford them the opportunity to take advantage of services offered to ease their transition is crucial.
Key words: veterans, student, higher education, college, transition, transformative learning theory, transition theory, Marine Corps, Marines.
Acknowledgements

I offer sincere gratitude to Dr. Lynda Beltz whose mentorship and tutelage was invaluable to me both personally and professionally. Her confidence and support of me throughout this process provided the role model I needed to complete this study from afar. Her contributions and guidance to the successful completion of this investigation will always be very much appreciated.

I also thank Dr. Kristal Clemons and Ms. Jodie Parker for their readership, guidance, encouragement and assistance in serving on my thesis committee. I am blessed to have such an outstanding group of professionals to guide me through this process.

I acknowledge the Voluntary Education Program personnel who serve across the globe in assisting service members in pursuing their educational and career goals each and every day. I would also like to thank the staff of the Marine Corps Education Program on Okinawa for their unwavering support of Marines and family members.

A sincere acknowledgement and gratitude for the men and women who serve in the U.S. Marine Corps for their courage, tenacity, and protection of our freedom as U.S. citizens. I wish all of you success when it is your time to transition to civilian life.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their unwavering support and encouragement. To my parents, Fred and Kimiko Kingsbury, who did not have the opportunity to attend higher education, I thank them for teaching me the value of never giving up and for encouraging me for many years.

I thank my husband, Thomas Alan Smilie, for his constant support and encouragement. I have been going to school during our entire marriage and without his support for my educational endeavors this goal would not have been possible.

I thank my daughter, Summer Smilie, for sharing her time with me during countless evenings, weekends and holidays while I worked on my studies. She is my daily inspiration and I am so fortunate to have her as my daughter.

I thank my sister, Christine James and my niece, Kiyomi Nunez, for being my cheerleaders and for their support and belief in me. They inspire me with their wisdom and strength, and I look forward to what the future brings for us all.
Chapter One: Introduction

Problem of Practice

Many young veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are ending their careers in the Marine Corps and choosing to enter or return to school and resume life as civilians. It is estimated that the current Marine population of 202,000 will be reduced to 174,000 by 2017 (Feickert, A, 2014, p.1). Many Marines are voluntarily leaving the Marine Corps as their first enlistment of four years of active duty service are coming to an end. In addition, with the downsizing of the military during peacetime, many more Marines will be involuntarily released from serving in the Marine Corps as will be the case of all military services. At the same time of the drawdown in military forces, the Marine Corps will continue to be instrumental in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly on the island of Okinawa, where over 13,000 Marines are currently assigned. This region and its need for global growth, will see a resurgence of Marines in the Unit Deployment Program (UDP) to provide continuous training opportunities for Marines to protect America’s and our Asian partners’ assets and to maintain peace, stability and respond to national disasters in this strategic part of the world.

Due to the increasing number of service members leaving active duty service, coupled with the improved GI Bill benefits available to them, a significant number of veterans are entering higher education. Currently, the Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits are for veterans who began their active duty service after September 10, 2001. The benefit is afforded to veterans who have served a minimum of 90 days and who were honorably discharged. Thirty-six months of benefits may be used for up to fifteen years after leaving active duty service. Currently, the Post 9/11 GI Bill affords veterans with the following benefits:

Tuition Assistance for the 2013-2014 Academic Year:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maximum Tuition &amp; Fee Reimbursement per Academic Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of School</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private or Foreign School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Military Housing Allowance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MHA Rate Exceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of School</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools in US Territories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusively Online Training (No Classroom Instruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending classes at ½ time or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Duty Trainee (or transferee spouse of servicemember)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A yearly book stipend of $1,000 is also included (www.gibill.va.gov.).

With the extensive benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, institutions of higher education can expect to see an increase in their veteran population for years to come. Recent improvements to the GI Bill also include the ability of an active duty service member to transfer benefits to spouses and children if the service members elects not to pursue higher education themselves (Sewell, 2010). It is estimated that the number of Post-9/11 veterans aged 39 or younger grew from 2007’s 1.2 million to nearly 2 million in 2013 (Radford, p. 5). While the exact number who will choose to use these higher education benefits
is unknown, many of these young veterans receive little preparation to enter institutions of higher learning.

The Department of Defense (DoD) Directive 5124.02, titled Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, dated June 23, 2008, established policies, assigned responsibilities, and provided procedures for the military services to provide and administer the mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP). This program mandates all service members separating from active duty service participate in TAP and that commanders are required to sign-off that all service members completing TAP have an individual transition plan (ITP). In 2012, TAP was revised to the Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success). The DoD redesigned the TAP program and incorporated partnerships with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education and the Small Business Administration to provide service members with the information and tools they need to be career ready upon separation from active duty service in the military. This revised transition program is designed to ensure that the current generation of service members is provided the tools they need to make them successful in their transition from military to civilian life. The Transition GPS, currently known as the TRS Seminar, was implemented in March 2012 at all Marine Corps installations. It is a DoD mandated, weeklong program that all service members are required to participate in prior to separating from active duty. The core curriculum consists of two days of information on: an Individual Transition Plan (ITP), a 12-month budget, registration in the VA’s e-benefits program, counseling on military reserve service, resiliency training (family needs, stress management, support systems, special issues, and value of a mentor), and a Military Occupation Crosswalk (MOC) - a two hour program that identifies gaps in skills obtained in the military versus skills required to be successful in a civilian career. The transferability of military skills to civilian credentials/career fields, and completion of assessments to assist service members with their interests/skills are also a component in the MOC Crosswalk program. Two days of Department of Labor employment workshops are provided where
service members complete at least two job applications, a resume, and a list of professional references. On the last day of the week, service members can choose a four-hour pathway of their choice, which includes the College/University Pathway or the Employment Pathway. The target population of TRS is service members who are 18-24 years old, have completed their first four years of active duty service, are involuntarily separated from active duty, or electing to separate from active duty service in a short timeframe. In the Marine Corps, separating Marines must meet with their career counselor for pre-separation counseling. At that time, they are recommended and enrolled into the TRS, which is usually 12 months prior to separation from active duty. The final segment of the TRS is the Capstone. The career planners review each Marine’s Individual Transition Plan at least 90 days prior to separation from the Marine Corps. The Commanding Officer will then meet with the Marine and verify completion of all TRS requirements and sign off on the ITP Checklist.

Transition Readiness Advisors, who are employed in the Marine Corps’ Education Program, conduct the four-hour TRS College/University Pathway. There are three TRS Advisors currently employed in the Education Program on Okinawa. They serve as facilitators and conduct education workshops, activities and events, provide one-on-one counseling to transitioning Marines and family members, serve as subject matter experts in contributing to the Marine Corps’ Education Program, assist Marines in conducting online educational and career assessments, and assists in providing program analysis.

Following the completion of the core Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) week of briefings, Marines may choose a non-mandatory, supplemental, two-day ‘Accessing Higher Education’ track or ‘Career Technical Training’ track. An Entrepreneur Pathway will be provided by the Small Business Association several times a year. The ‘Accessing Higher Education’ track is provided by the Education Program’s TRS Advisors. In this two-day track, Marines receive more comprehensive and in-depth information and assistance on preparing for college. They also complete additional online assessments
to determine interests, skills, and their choice of college majors, complete a college application, compare educational institutions, and receive one-on-one counseling from TRS Advisors.

Marines are encouraged to take advantage of TRS by attending early (up to 14 months prior to their departure from active duty service), but in some cases, Marines attend only months away from becoming a civilian, which is little time to prepare and apply for schools, meet admission deadlines, find a residence, and start a new life as an adult in the civilian sector for the first time. Clemons and Milson (2008) indicated “the lack of participation in transitional programs has serious implications for all transitioning service members, particularly those who entered the military with only a high school diploma and little knowledge of the civilian world of work” (as cited in Simpson, A. & Armstrong, S., 2009, p. 179). These implications include a higher unemployment rate of 9% for veterans in 2013 versus 6.7% for U.S. citizens in general; the inability or lack of knowledge to obtain Veterans Affairs benefits such as medical care; rehabilitative services as well as social services; and the lack of preparedness for entering the civilian world (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Recent studies from the Society of Human Resources Management and the Department of Veteran’s Affairs indicated that in “today’s economic climate, transitioning from the military to the civilian world will mean entering an unyielding job market and a period of unemployment for most veterans” (Military.com, 2010). It is anticipated that additional education and career counseling will be needed to translate military experiences and specialty schools into civilian skills and educational credit. The transition from military to civilian life is a difficult one for most service members, especially in times of war. Service members need to seek and gain assistance for post-traumatic stress and other combat-related injuries and issues prior to separation from service in order to be effective in their transition to civilian life.

Colleges and universities are rushing to prepare for the influx of student veterans entering campuses across the nation with the end of the long war in the Middle East, the downsizing of the military, and the generous educational and living allowance benefits of the GI Bill. But studies on how
the military services can assist colleges and universities in the transition of service members to higher education are virtually non-existent. Currently, Marines on Okinawa have indicated in overwhelming numbers that they need the assistance and information on attending college well in advance of transitioning out of the military. Higher education professionals must be prepared for this special population of students and their specific needs.

**Meeting the Higher Education Needs of Okinawa-Based Marines**

This dissertation is a study of the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program’s existing services, additional needed services, and what could be improved upon to provide a roadmap for Marines on Okinawa in preparation for separation from military service and entry to an institution of higher education. It was undertaken with the hope that the findings may assist Marine education practitioners on Okinawa, and in other military services around the world by recommending additional, appropriate services and information to provide to service members departing the military and supporting their transition to civilian life and education.

**Goals and Significance**

The sub-tropical island of Okinawa is approximately 400 miles south of mainland Japan and has an area of approximately 70 miles long and 7 miles wide. It is strategically located in Asia and is 600 miles from the Korean peninsula, 1,145 miles from China, with the East China Sea to the left and the Pacific Ocean to the right. The Marines were the first to land on Okinawa in 1945 during the Battle of Okinawa in World War II. Today, there are currently 13,117 Marines stationed on the island of Okinawa in a peacekeeping capacity. There are approximately 50,000 total American service members and family members (from all branches of military services) currently stationed on the island of Okinawa (Asahi Newspaper, 2013). President Obama in May 2013 identified what he referred to as a “Pivot to Asia” as the war draws down in the Middle East and the focus of the military in Asia turns to
North Korea and their continuous threats of increasing their nuclear capacities and more recently, testing of long-range missiles in Asia (The Foreign Policy Initiative, May 2013). The Marine Corps is instrumental on Okinawa as they serve as peacekeepers, first responders for potential political outbreaks, and aid in humanitarian and disaster relief efforts in Asia.

As seen in Table 1, 79% of Marines on Okinawa are between the ages of 17-30 years of age, with 91% men and 9% women. The racial make-up of Marines on Okinawa are 63.6% White, 13.8% Hispanic, 12.8% Black, 4.5% Asian, and 5.4% Other/Unknown. A majority of the Marines ages 17-25 years serving in their first enlistment (four years), have completed 16 weeks of basic training, have completed their military occupational specialty (MOS) school (training that can last for several weeks to several months depending on the MOS), and have completed their first tour of duty (four years of active duty service) at one or more duty stations. For Okinawa-based Marines, this may be their first duty assignment. The Marines in this study are assigned to the Marine Corps Base Camp S. D. Butler, in Okinawa, Japan. The Marine population is predominately a young population with “62% of Marines 25 or younger” and “23% of Marines not old enough to legally consume alcohol” (The Marine Corps: A Young and Vigorous Force, Dec 2012, p. 2).

Table 1

*Installation Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Active Duty</th>
<th>Percent Married</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>11,703</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>90.8%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,117</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>91.0%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>17-21 Yrs</th>
<th>22-30 Yrs</th>
<th>31-40 Yrs</th>
<th>41-50 Yrs</th>
<th>51+ Yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-21 Yrs</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Marine Corps Retirees w/in a 50 Mile Radius</td>
<td>Marine Corps Family Members on base w/in a 50 Mile Radius</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15,917</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.00%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From “The Marine Corps – A Young and Vigorous Force” Demographics Update, Dec 2012.

There are six, geographically separate Marine Corps installations on Okinawa, each with its own education center. An education center is a central office on the military installation where Marines can obtain academic guidance counseling, education information, attend various education briefs on topics such as tuition assistance, commissioning programs, Leadership Scholar Program, GI Bill Benefits, financial aid resources, United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP), and receive assistance with choosing a college, a major, applying for college, and general academic advisement. The education center is staffed by one Education Services Officer, who serves as the director of the education program, with a team of academic guidance counselors, education technicians, testing personnel and transition readiness advisors throughout the six Marine Corps camps on Okinawa. Each education center on Okinawa is similar, with the main education centers at Camp Foster and Camp Hansen being the largest, followed by smaller education centers at Camp Kinser, Camp Courtney, Camp Schwab, and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. The northern camp education centers (Camp Schwab and Camp Hansen) have a more mobile population of Marines and are traditionally populated with Marines who are in infantry positions. The Camp Foster Marines traditionally hold support roles such as IT, postal services, headquarters administration, etc. Marines at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma are traditionally in aircraft support roles.

Each of the military services has a Voluntary Education Program. The Voluntary Education Program maintains and operates all educational activities on a military installation such as academic
skills development, high school completion, career technical education, undergraduate and graduate
degree programs information and administers the tuition assistance for military members (Department of
Defense Instruction 1322.25, March 15, 2011). The Voluntary Education Program refers to the military
services’ off-duty, adult education program, education centers and personnel who provide educational
counseling, and seminars on various educational topics, such as the GI Bill, application to college,
career counseling, military tuition assistance, financial assistance, and various Marine Corps specific
educational programs.

The population of students enrolled in off-duty voluntary education is predominately young,
first-term Marines, family members and DoD civilians. There are approximately 30,000 active duty
military service members, 1,400 DoD civilians, 700 DoD Dependent School teachers and staff, and
25,000 U.S. family members (Kadena Air Base Fact Sheet, October 2012). Most Marine students are
first-generation college students who entered the Marine Corps as a means to pay for their college
education. They are frequently attracted to the education benefits when they are recruited into the
military and plan to go to college when they join the military.

Marketing the Marine Corps Education Program on Okinawa is ongoing throughout the year. In
additional to in-house flyers, massive email distributions, social media, web, radio programming,
advertising on marquees and contacting Marine Corps unit leadership, the Marine Corps Community
Services has a marketing department that can assist with marketing materials and distribution for the
education program to help get the word about resources and services to Marines on Okinawa. Weekly
education briefs are advertised to all Marine Corps camps on Okinawa and Facebook is also used to
advertise.

**Contracted Schools on Okinawa**
There are currently five contracted U.S. institutions that provide face-to-face classes and degree programs in the Pacific through an Air Force contract. The schools serve five-year contracts, with the current contract set to expire in July 2015, upon which time new contracts will be awarded for four to five schools depending on what offerings they will fulfill in the new contract (e.g. undergraduate education, technical/vocational education, graduate education). The institutions that are currently serving under the education contract in the Pacific are: (1) Central Texas College, (2) The University of Maryland University College, (3) Bowie State University, (4) Troy University, and (5) the University of Phoenix. The Education Services Officer (ESO) at each military installation is normally a DoD civilian employee who oversees and manages the voluntary education program and services provided at the military installation. As the subject matter expert on higher education for the installation, the ESO is required to be qualified in the Education Services Series 1740. This DoD civilian series includes the requirement to have a four year degree with 24 semester hours in the following areas of study: Tests and Measurements, Adult Education, Education Program Administration, Career Development or Design, Teaching Methods, Guidance and Counseling, Career Planning, and Occupational Information. At least one class must be in Tests and Measurements or Adult Education. The ESO’s responsibilities include oversight of the schools offering classes at their respective installation(s), conducting quarterly quality assurance surveys, student surveys, meeting with the leadership of each institution throughout the year on issues or concerns, reviewing and approving class schedules, working with military units to provide specialized training requests through the contracted schools, managing a Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTES) Testing Office, and providing recommendations and meeting the educational needs of the military community.

Institutional Overview
The contracted schools began offering adult education college courses and degree programs in Asia in 1956. Classes are offered on all military installations on Okinawa in eight-week academic sessions year-round.

Central Texas College (CTC)

Central Texas College has been in Asia since the early 1980’s. It is accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and its main campus is housed in Killeen, Texas. The Pacific Far East Campus offers Associate in Arts and Associate in Science degrees in Applied Management, Criminal Justice, Early Childhood Education, General Studies, Hospitality Management, Information Technology and Network Systems Administration.

University of Maryland University College (UMUC)

University of Maryland University College was the first to begin offering classes in Asia over fifty years ago. They are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and are an umbrella of the University of Maryland system in College Park, Maryland. Currently, UMUC offers certificates in Accounting, Computer Studies, Foreign Language Area Studies (Korean and Japanese), and Management. They offer Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Communication Studies, Computer & Information Systems, Criminal Justice, Digital Media & Web Technology, East Asian Studies, English, General Studies, History, Humanities, Human Resource Management, Information Systems Management, Management Studies, Political Science, Psychology, and Social Sciences.

Bowie State University

Bowie State University is overseen by UMUC in an administrative capacity under the education contract and offers National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Bachelor of
Science degree programs in Elementary Education or Secondary Education in English, History, and Social Sciences.

Troy University

Troy University is accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Troy University has been offering graduate level programs in Asia since the early 1990’s. They currently offer the Master of Science degree in International Relations.

Troy University was founded in 1887 and is a public university located in Troy, Alabama. The institution offers associate, bachelor’s, master’s, education specialist and doctoral degrees. The university has had a long-standing relationship with the U.S. military since the 1950’s and operates a TROY Global Campus where they offer extension courses both face-to-face and online to active duty members at military installations around the world. Courses are offered in the evening and in weekend formats.

The University of Phoenix

The University of Phoenix is accredited by the North Central Association and has been offering graduate programs in Asia since 2009. They offer the Master of Business Administration degree, the Master of Education in Adult Education & Training, Elementary Education, Secondary Education, Special Teacher Education, and Teacher Leadership, as well as the Master of Management degree.

Marine Tuition Assistance

Marines have the option to take college classes and pursue degrees during their off-duty hours utilizing the military tuition assistance benefits, which currently pay up to $4,500 per year in tuition benefits per Marine to pursue college credit towards vocational, associate, baccalaureate, and master’s degree programs. In 2012, over 5,300 Marines utilized military tuition assistance and over $4.9 million
dollars in tuition assistance was authorized for Marines on Okinawa. Approximately 75% of tuition assistance was authorized for distance education classes online. Beginning in 2013, new rules regarding the qualifications to be authorized the use of Marine Corps tuition assistance were put into place. These new rules, which severely limited the predominately younger population of Marines on Okinawa, included a waiting period of 24 months of active duty service were completed, which equates to half of a Marine’s initial four-year tour of active duty service. Thus, Marines who were serving their first four years of service have to wait until they have completed two years of service in the Marine Corps prior to being approved to use tuition assistance. As a result of this new tuition assistance policy, fewer Marines on Okinawa qualify to use their tuition assistance benefits and rely on either federal financial assistance or paying out of pocket for their education during the first two years of service.

The Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program was the focus of this study as the researcher is currently employed as an Education Services Officer (ESO) with the Marine Corps at Marine Corps Base Camp S. D. Butler on Okinawa, Japan. The role of the ESO is to provide the leadership of the Voluntary Education Program (and in the case of the Marine Corps ESO, leadership for the library program) for their branch of service. There is also an ESO for the Air Force and the Army on Okinawa at their respective installations. The Marine Corps education centers on Okinawa provide face-to-face undergraduate classes to Marines, Sailors, Airmen, Soldiers, family members and DoD civilians. In 2012, 368 face-to-face classes were offered with 4,782 enrollments. Face-to-face classes are held during 8-week terms, five terms per year.

**Marines on Okinawa**

The findings of this study serve to assist the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa to further meet the transitional and educational needs of Marines who are preparing to enter
institutions of higher education by providing additional services at the education centers prior to their
departure from the Marine Corps.

The Marine Corps manpower is currently at 202,000 members. By 2017, the Marine Corps plans
to reduce its manpower to 174,000 as has traditionally been done after each major military conflict is
over. There is currently urgency among the military services to prepare exiting service members for their
transition to civilian life as evidenced by the recent addition of the weeklong Transition Readiness
Seminars (TRS). The TRS is a five-day DoD mandated program to assist all service members to obtain
information on transition services prior to leaving active duty service. It is a program that is run in
coordination with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor. The TRS includes
three days of a core curriculum, which includes topics such as resume writing and interview skills,
employment, personal budgeting, and veterans’ benefits. In addition, there are two days of military to
civilian pathways that service member can choose from that meets their individual goals:
University/College, Vocational/Technical training, Employment, or Entrepreneurial endeavors. The
Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program conducts the instruction and counseling for the
College/University Pathway and a supplemental, two-day Accessing Higher Education workshop.
Transitioning Marines predominately have plans to return to the United States after leaving active duty
to either find a civilian job or begin/resume their college education. They oftentimes return to their state
of residency where they have the support of family and friends, as well as eligibility for the in-state
residency rates to attend face-to-face or online college/universities. There is also a very small
population of Marines who elect to separate from service on Okinawa, marry Japanese women, and
utilize their G.I. Bill benefits at the adult education programs offered on military installations through
one of the five contracted schools on island. Although most students study for a period of time while
stationed on Okinawa, there are approximately 200 students each year who graduate on island and
participate in commencement ceremonies. Only a handful complete their entire degree on Okinawa.
Most students have a culmination of many years of study as adult students who piece together a degree from several institutions, including online learning as a result of the frequent movement in the military lifestyle.

**Research Questions**

Informed by the theoretical lenses of Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition, and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory framework, the following research question and sub-questions were reviewed in this study:

1. How can the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education?
   a. How have military training and experiences prepared or neglected to prepare Marines transitioning to civilian life and higher education?
   b. To what extent does education, career counseling and transition services prepare Marines for transition to a civilian life?

**Overview of Theoretical Framework**

This study, viewed through the lens of Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, investigated the researcher’s desire to provide cohesive services in the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program to meet the educational needs, career goals and transition services for Marines transitioning to civilian life.

**The Schlossberg Theory of Transition**

The Schlossberg Theory of Transition has been defined as how individuals cope with transitions or changes in their lives (Schlossberg, 1981, p.2-18). Student veterans are more likely to experience many types of transitions when returning to civilian life and institutions of higher education as they
transition from military to civilian life and are responsible for their own decision-making. The transition theory is valuable in helping to understand how student veterans can learn from their transitional experiences of serving in the military to becoming college students. Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition describes the transition that individuals experience by “identifying the type of transition, the degree to which one’s life has been altered, where one is in the transition process, and the resources one can apply to making it a success” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 161). The theory provides an avenue to analyze transitions that individuals take when they are experiencing a major life event such as embarking on a career, switching careers, moving, retiring, or leaving the military and becoming a civilian. According to Schlossberg, there are four features that describe transitions, which she refers to as the 4 Ss. They include – situation, self, support and strategies, and can be utilized for personal life transition experiences (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). Situation refers to the situation unique to the individual in transition, such as their situation at home, in their professional life, and with family members they may be helping to care for. ‘Self’ refers to the transitioning individual’s coping skills such as their disposition toward the impending transition. ‘Support’ refers to services, resources and people who are accessible to support a transitioning individual. ‘Strategies’ refer to how a person in transition copes with the transition. Schlossberg indicates that the more strategies they are equipped with, the better the transition experience will be (Schlossberg, 2011, pgs 160-161). Education professionals can also find the theory useful in assisting student veterans in their successful academic transition. The 4 S system assists individuals adjust to change and find resources to support them in their transition.

The Transition theory is closely related to the Transformative Learning theory. Both theories strive for individuals to find meaning from their lived experiences. In the case of student veterans, the transition from full-time military work to life as a student is further complicated by their transition from military service, which currently may include experiences in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.
The Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory framework was used as a lens to focus the study on adult transition of student veterans, student needs assessments, student adjustment, and access to education and civilian career opportunities. Transformative Learning is learning that takes place as a result of a problem in order to create meaning of one’s life. Mezirow identified stages of transformative learning as “experiencing a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognizing that others have gone through a similar process, exploring options, formulating a plan of action, and reintegration” (Caffarella & Merriam, 1999, p. 320). Transformative learning is instrumental in the transition process for student veterans. The military life is one filled with structure, authoritative orders, and for the most part, most decisions made on one’s behalf. For the student veteran, however, there will be many decisions to be made on their own once they leave the confines of the military. Transformative learning is important from an educational perspective as veterans transform from military customs to civilian life on college campuses and become autonomous thinkers.

Review of the Literature

A survey of the literature pertaining to this study led to additional literature regarding support for student veterans, transition programs, student needs assessments, and adult transition. Literature regarding the transition issues currently affecting student veterans was analyzed from the work of researchers such as Clemens and Milsom (2008), Rumann and Hamrick (2009), Naphan (2011), Ackerman, DiRamio and Mitchell (2009) and Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995). Secondly, current practices in postsecondary education to assist veteran students were reviewed from the work of researchers such as Vance and Miller (2009), Wise (2011), Burnett and Segoric (2009), and Ford, Northrup and Wiley (2009). Finally, other related literature pertaining to this study in the area of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was reviewed, as it is prevalent amongst the current population of
student veterans entering higher education. The work of Widome, Kehle, Carlson, Laska, Gulden, and Lust (2011) was analyzed.

**Research Design**

Creswell (2007) identified phenomenological research as a strategy that is suited for research to study individuals’ lived experiences. The researcher attempts to understand individuals’ experiences by listening to them and determining how individuals make sense of their experiences. The researcher conducts individual interviews, focus groups, and then interprets the data based on statements that help explain a phenomenon. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis theory is ideal when the researcher is interested in “determining how individuals make sense of a major transition in their life” (Creswell, p. 3).

The study consisted of emailed surveys to Marines stationed on Okinawa, Japan who are transitioning from active duty service to civilian life within a year. An analysis was conducted on the current education program, transition assistance program, curricula, and educational counseling available to determine how Marines are currently prepared for higher education prior to leaving the military. A discussion focus group with various education personnel from the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa was also conducted with the researcher. In addition, observations of the Marine Corps’ Transition Assistance Program, Tuition Assistance, and College101 briefs were conducted.

Participants were purposefully selected by meeting the following criteria: first-term Marines (those who are serving within their first four years of active duty) and who are stationed in Okinawa, Japan; participants between 18-25 years of age; and a mix of female and male Marines from various racial backgrounds and career fields. Participants were identified and recruited through the academic guidance counselors and TRS advisors assigned at six geographically separate Marine Corps education
centers on Okinawa, Japan. The academic guidance counselors are DoD civilians who serve as the equivalent to academic advisors in the military services’ Voluntary Education Program. There is one guidance counselor assigned to each of the six Marine Corps camps on Okinawa. The guidance counselors provide many education briefs, one-on-one counseling, proctor examinations, oversee the education center facility needs, and work with the contracted schools at their respective camps to insure the education program is meeting the needs of the Marine Corps community.

The pre-selected Marines were asked to participate in an online survey. Participants were provided a Web-Based Informed Consent form, which insured their anonymity. The survey was conducted online and consisted of thirteen open-ended questions. The sample size was eleven participants. The investigator reviewed the results of the survey data to determine the emergence of clear themes.

Following the survey, a discussion focus group was conducted with various personnel who assist transitioning Marines by the investigator to determine additional needs identified in TRS Seminars, including the types of one-on-one assistance requested and provided by the TRS advisors, the TRS advisors’ perceptions of Marines’ concerns regarding their transition to college, frequently asked questions, and programs and services recommended by education center personnel.

There are three Transition Readiness Seminar advisors employed by the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa. The researcher conducted a discussion focus group with education personnel that consisted of nine questions that were determined after the survey with the Marines was completed. These nine questions were designed to provide additional information from the education personnel’s first-hand accounts assisting Marines.

Justification
All literature reviewed for this study emphasized a lack of research in the area of transition of military service members to civilian life and college campuses. This became a more urgent matter as President Obama began the drawdown of the troop presence in the Middle East in 2011. As a consequence, the Marine Corps population on Okinawa will eventually be reduced, as will the general population of active duty Marines nation-wide. With the drawdown of troops, come several other factors that impact the urgency for the need of additional studies in this area. Many service members are choosing to leave the military services and enter into civilian careers and/or institutions of higher education, while many more are likely to be involuntarily separated from the military services as they are downsized due to impending budget cuts. This will lead to a large influx of student veterans entering higher education, especially as they will have the financial backing of the GI Bill to pay for their education and living expenses. The Marine Corps Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa is preparing to provide appropriate services to ease the transition for Marines to civilian life. The findings of this study may assist current practitioners in the military services’ Voluntary Education Programs as they continue to prepare and provide appropriate educational services to military members in preparation for a successful transition to civilian life and higher education.

A review of existing literature revealed this topic of research is more cohesive to an interpretive phenomenological theory research paradigm. As this is a relatively new topic of study, quantitative data was scarce or non-existent due to the severe lack of previous studies on this topic. Through this study, more information was gleaned from first-hand accounts of participants in this area of research. The current, existing literature is limited to how education professionals can assist student veterans once they arrive on campus. However, this investigation focused on how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program can help to prepare military service members transition to life as student veterans prior to leaving active duty service.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The focus of this literature review was an exploration of the educational needs of Marines transitioning to civilian life and becoming college students. A survey of the literature pertaining to the transition of military service members to civilian life, work and education was conducted. Specifically, literature pertaining to the current issues affecting student veterans, current practices in higher education to assist student veterans, and transitional programs that need to be explored to identify the extent of education, career advisement and transitional service programs to help Marines adjust to their transition process was explored. These guiding themes were used to further develop the study. Currently, there is a gap in published, peer-reviewed literature pertaining to student veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan war era -- 2001 to the present (DiRamio et al., 2008; McBain et al., 2012; Zinger and Cohen 2010). This generation of veterans is entering institutions of higher learning where education professionals are just now scratching the surface on providing appropriate student services to this unique population of students. Without peer-reviewed studies, student services professionals are learning and providing services as they see the need for veterans’ assistance arise on their campuses. “Despite the long history of veterans’ education benefits and the presence of veteran students on campuses, relatively little research has been conducted on effective campus programs and services that successfully aid veterans in their college transition,” according to McBain (McBain et al., p. 11). As student veterans arrive on campus utilizing their Post-9/11 GI Bill tuition benefits, student affairs professionals are learning first-hand that the needs of current student veterans are different from the average adult, transfer student as they have different needs for services such as Veterans Affairs benefit counseling, transition services, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and/or Traumatic Brain Injuries, military service credit transferability, and global life experiences. Institutions are setting up veteran-friendly offices that are designated to assist the specific needs of student veterans, with 62% of institutions who responded to a 2012 American
Council on Education (ACE) survey indicating they now have services for student veterans (McBain et al., p. 7). The most frequently used on-campus services include VA educational benefits counseling, financial aid, tuition assistance and social/cultural events (McBain et al., p. 8). Veterans themselves are also contributing to this area of need through organizations such as the Student Veterans’ Organization (SVA). The SVA was organized after student veterans from World War II came together to form peer-to-peer support groups to serve their specific needs such as assistance with transition, housing, and readjusting to civilian life and college. The current generation of veterans returning from the long war in the Middle East faced issues upon arriving on college campuses also. They experienced a lack of support services for veterans on campus, which resulted in the greatly expanded SVA chapters throughout the world where veterans have settled and banded together on campuses to assist one another. The SVA was formed in January 2008 to provide the resources, programs and support network for student veterans on a national level (Student Veterans Association). The mission of the SVA is “to provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation” (Student Veterans Association). The SVA has student veteran group chapters at 950 locations, mostly on college campuses throughout the world. It is a non-profit organization that provides a network for veterans attending college. Support services are in place for student veterans to provide them programs, access to VA resources, and to insure that veterans’ needs are met once they leave the military and arrive on college campuses.

The military services’ transition programs have begun to take shape to provide the entire continuum of services needed for military members as they transition out of military service and transition into civilians and student veterans. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is now a one-week mandatory program for all service members leaving active duty between 3-24 months prior to separation from the military.

**Current Issues Affecting Student Veterans**
The first theme explored was the identification of current issues affecting student veterans in the areas of educational, career and transitional needs. A survey of the literature pertaining to this area, included support for student veterans, transitional programs, student needs assessments, and adult transition. C. Rumann and F. Hamrick conducted a study on student veterans in transition and noted “student’s post-deployment transitions may encompass all three (work, individual, and relationship transitions) because of the combinations of roles, functions and environments that are involved” (Rumann, C. & Hamrick, F., 2010, p. 435). Furthermore, survey respondents from the study “described three principal incongruities: military and academic life, and the incompatibilities of lingering stress and anxiety with returning to college” (Rumann, C. & Hamrick F., p. 440). Clemons and Milson indicated “the lack of participation in transitional programs has serious implications for all transitioning service members, particularly those who entered the military with only a high school diploma and little knowledge of the civilian world of work” (as cited in Simpson, A. & Armstrong, S., 2009, p. 179). Student veterans lack the information they need regarding their veteran’s benefits, knowledge of student veteran resources and knowledgeable personnel once they arrive on campus (ACE 2008).

Student veterans are generally considered to be nontraditional students as they are entering higher education as older students, may have college credit (whether it be transfer credit or military credit) that they bring with them, and have worked and/or are currently employed as they pursue their education (O’Herrin, 2011; American Council on Education, 2008; Ryan, et al., 2011; Brown and Gross, 2011). Veterans have also voiced their frustration in getting their military credit recognized for college credit by institutions (ACE 2008; Brown and Gross, 2011; Persky and Oliver; 2011). These issues are not new, but add to the need for additional support services and education for military members as they prepare for their transition to college.

Another issue facing student veterans is the feeling of isolation they experience if they do not connect with other student veterans on campus. Due to the difference in their ages and the vast
differences in their life experiences, student veterans oftentimes cannot relate to the traditional-aged college student at the same academic level as they are. They oftentimes need special services that assist them in maneuvering their Veterans’ Affairs benefits and/or assistance with physical or mental disabilities they obtained from their service in combat. It is also important that student veterans connect with peers who share similar experiences for retention purposes (ACE 2008). With the generous benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans oftentimes choose to pursue higher education once they complete their military service. As of 2012, over 760,000 veterans were attending college and utilizing their Post-9/11 GI Bill (Sander, 2012).

The Post-9/11 GI Bill

The Post-9/11 GI Bill Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 opened the doors for additional education benefits for service members and their families, and represented the greatest expansion of benefits since the GI Bill was first put in place in 1944 (ACE, 2012; O’Herrin, 2011). In a study conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Rand Corporation in 2010, almost 24 percent of respondents indicated that the GI Bill educational benefits was the determining factor in their decision to pursue higher education after transitioning out of active military service (ACE, 2010). Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits help to make education more affordable and accessible for student veterans. Current benefits include:

- In-state tuition and fees for all public schools
- $17,500 annually for private and foreign schools
- Yellow Ribbon Program ($10,000 above the maximum cap) for out-of-state fees for private institutions (combined matched funding from the institution and the U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs)
- Book and supplies stipend of up to $1,000
• Monthly living allowance

• 15 years to use 36 months of entitlement (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; GI Bill Programs website, 2012).

Many student veterans do not know enough about their GI Bill educational benefits to fully understand the financial challenges they may face once they are enrolled in college. Oftentimes they are under the impression that their benefits will be a sufficient amount to pay for tuition and living expenses, only to find themselves in need of additional sources of funding. Many institutions also find the GI Bill educational benefits challenging to understand. Since the introduction of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, student veterans have experienced difficulty in receiving timely payments and have resorted to taking out personal loans (ACE 2008; McCready, 2010).

An evaluation of resources to assist student veterans on campuses is important to their retention and academic success. Institutions have begun to set up veteran’s centers, hire veterans in positions that can provide assistance to other veterans, and prepare for the continued influx of the veteran population for the coming years (McCready, 2010).

**Higher Education Practices in Supporting Student Veterans**

Student veterans are considered to be a unique sub-set of the campus population with a unique set of needs that student affairs professionals can be instrumental with supporting the achievement of student success (DiRamio et al., 2008). Challenges effecting student veterans on campuses include finances, degree completion and social integration (McBain et al., p. 10). It is important to recognize the positive attributes that student veterans can bring to their institutions. Student veterans bring diversity, teamwork, leadership, work experience, knowledge and cultural awareness from living abroad, and a vast array of real-life experiences that can strengthen the campus community and make for a more value-added education (Hassan et al., 2010, O’Herrin, 2011; McGrevey and Kehrer, 2009).
A 2009 survey of over 700 institutions conducted by Cook and Kim, revealed that transition services and trained, knowledgeable staff who could assist the specialized needs of student veterans was severely lacking (Ryan, et al., 2011). Many institutions have begun to set up resources specific to the needs of student veterans such as veteran-specific orientations, veteran’s centers, student veteran learning communities, collaboration between school and community resources and organizations, peer mentors, student veteran only classes, and points of contact for student veteran specific needs on campus (O’Herrin, 2011; ACE, 2010).

Among those who have done so successfully, two community colleges identified in the July 2012 ACE report Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members as having comprehensive veteran support programs – Citrus College in Glendora, California and Mount Wachusetts Community College in Gardner, Massachusetts. Citrus College offers a separate 3 credit transition course for veterans. The course teaches them about what they can do to experience a positive transition. In addition, in 2006, Citrus College created a Veterans Network which led to the creation of a Citrus College Veterans Center, a place for student veterans to congregate, obtain services, meet with a counselor and attend workshops (Best Practices in Counseling and Advisement for Veterans, 2013, pgs. 5-6).

Mount Wachusetts Community College received an award in 2013 for their design of the Northeast Veteran Training Rehabilitation Center. It is a residential center for veterans with disabilities. The center provides housing for veterans and their families and offers therapy on site. The college also houses the Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success. This center provides assistance unique to the veteran population such as financial, social, and academic services, counseling, mentoring, and on-campus assistance (Best Practices in Counseling and Advisement for Veterans, 2013, pg. 7).
Some institutions have also begun tracking student veterans to insure they are identified early on, referred to the proper resources and services on campus, retained, and in some cases, to assist in recruiting other student veterans (Hassan et al., 2010; American Council on Education, 2008; DiRamio et al., 2008). As tracking student veterans on campus is a relatively new business process for institutions of higher learning, they will now have the opportunity to measure the services used by this specific population, as well as determine retention and graduation rates, and follow the success or failures of this population to determine future services needed by student veterans on campus.

**Services for Student Veterans**

Higher education institutions have steadily increased services for student veterans in counseling, formed student veteran committees, increased awareness through outreach and marketing efforts, inclusion in institutional strategic plans, and the creation of dedicated student veterans offices with knowledgeable support staff (McBain et al., p. 9). Several institutions who have strong relationships with the military community are leading the efforts in providing outstanding student services and support systems for student veterans. These institutions include the University of Maryland University College, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and Syracuse University.

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC) has a long history in serving the military student. The University has been in Asia since the 1950’s offering classes to active duty military, civilians and family members. UMUC has a military advising program to work directly with active duty and student veterans. They work with students on degree planning as well as incorporate their career goals for an integrated approach to academic advising (Investing in Veterans, 2013, pg. 12). UMUC’s Asian Division serves the Marines on Okinawa. They offer multiple certificate, associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs on Okinawa. Academic advising and student support is readily available and the UMUC professors are accustomed to working with frequently mobile military
students. When humanitarian exercises are taking place in the Pacific and Marines are called upon to assist, UMUC professors work with students to assist them in completing coursework that was abruptly put on pause when a Marine suddenly deploys to a country experiencing a national disaster. Additional schools, such as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, provide military-friendly student support services as well.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System in partnership with the Minnesota Army National Guard and the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Higher Education Veterans Programs, and MyMilitaryEducation.org, offers veterans the MyMilitary GPS Life Plan to support veterans’ transition from active duty, to college, and then on to a career. This program provides services in career exploration, transferability of military credit, and educational and transition counseling (Investing in Veterans, 2013, pg. 13). Additional recommendations from this report suggest programs and services that assist veterans in succeeding in college: expanded reintegration programs, consolidation of web-based resources, make transition resources available to veterans pre and post separation, community-base resources for veterans, military specific career and education advising, and supporting veterans organization on campus (Investing in Veterans, 2013, pgs. 14-16).

Syracuse University has had a relationship serving military students that goes back 50 years. Chancellor William P. Tolley served on the original committee that created the first GI Bill after the passing of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. Some of the notable services available to student veterans at Syracuse University are the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, which provides educational opportunities to Post 9/11 active duty military members and their spouses to assist them with the necessary skills to be successful in their educational and career endeavors. The institute is geared toward transitioning service members and spouses, and provides training in entrepreneurship and small business management. Syracuse University also houses a Veteran’s Resource Center that opened in 2009, a Veteran’s Lounge, and a Veteran’s Commencement Celebration.
In a 2012 ACE survey, it found that “institutions with a dedicated office continue to be more likely than those without such an office to engage in recruitment efforts” and “are more likely to tailor common services, including financial aid, tuition assistance counseling, employment assistance, academic advising, campus events, and career services to those students” (McBain et al., p. 9). Table 2 from the ACE survey conducted in July 2012, indicates the percentage of institutions that currently have initiated services to assist student veterans. In the survey results, the researchers found that there was a direct correlation between the availability of programs and services for student veterans and the inclusion of this population of students in the institutions’ strategic plan (McBain et al., p. 14). Researchers also found that institutions responding to the survey indicated that several considerations identified as the most pressing action items are: the need to increase the availability of programs and services for student veterans; the need to train staff on issues that student veterans face when they arrive to campus; and the need for more institutional funding to increase student veteran services (McBain et al., 15). In addition, the importance of having a marketing and outreach plan is crucial to identify, attract and retain student veterans. By far the most important method for institutions to provide services to student veterans is to have a dedicated office on campus to serve military and student veterans. Dedicated student veteran offices tend to have more knowledgeable staff to assist students, have centralized support services, and provide an avenue for student veterans to engage with other students with military and life experiences. Organizations such as the Student Veterans of America (SVA) have also helped to solidify the presence of support services on college campuses for military and student veterans.

Table 2

*Institutions’ Initiatives to Serve Veterans/Military Students, by Institution Type*
Student veterans will need to be identified at institutions of higher education in order to provide them the transitional services they need and desire. In the Hassan et al. article titled *Bottom Line: The Veteran Student in 2010*, the authors indicated “The way we change campuses and classrooms is by changing the conversation we have about veterans (from negative to positive) and generating real conversations with veterans” (Hassan et al., 2010, p. 32). With less than one percent of the American population having served in the military, the need to educate the higher education community to serve student veterans is crucial. DiRamio et al. also emphasized the need to identify and capture the veteran population at institutions by stating “The task of establishing a registry in college should be viewed as an effort to give these students a voice in their own education and an active role in their transition to
college (DiRamio, et al., p. 93, 2008). The ACE survey found the following areas of services and programs provided to student veterans that could be improved upon: (1) Transition services for military members and student veterans to college; (2) Ongoing training for institutional faculty and staff; (3) Sensitivity among faculty and staff towards student veterans’ issues; and (4) Collaboration and integrating services and programs for military students upon their return to campus (McBain et al., p. 48). The transition from serving in the active duty military to becoming a college student can be one of the most difficult transitions in the life of a student veteran (DiRamio, et al., 2008). Student veterans need services and programs that address their transition needs in order to successfully integrate into the higher education community. By incorporating Schlossberg’s 4S system, higher education personnel can help student veterans utilize existing institutional and community resources to ease their transition (Ryan, et al., 2011; Schlossberg, 2011).

Operation College Promise

Operation College Promise is a New Jersey based organization that has assisted over 300 campuses in training staff to provide services specifically to veteran populations. Through their Certificate for Veteran Service Providers (CVSP) program, institutions are trained on how to provide the services to assist veterans to succeed in their transition to civilian life and college. Wendy Lang, the program director for Operation College Promise, indicates there is much more work to be done in this area as there are many more colleges and universities that need the assistance to build their student veteran support services. Topics covered in the CVSP certificate include: A Primer on Military Culture, What's New, What to Expect - An Update on the Status of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, Serving My Country - A Student Veterans Panel, Cracking the Code of Military Credit and Experience Transfer, Invisible Injuries of Contemporary Warfare, Resources for Veterans in Transition, and Promising Practices in Veteran Support Services: A National Perspective (Operation College Promise, 2014).
Transition services provided prior to leaving the military and again once student veterans arrive on campus are of paramount importance in their successful transition to civilian life.

Transition Services to Assist Marines

The third and final theme determined to what extent current education, career advising and transition programs help prepare Marines for a civilian life. “A veteran without the education or training required for a specific industry will generally be unable to find employment in that industry. This is true for returning service members whose military occupation skills do not translate directly to civilian industry and for older veterans who have worked for many years in an industry that is in decline. Recently discharged veterans can make use of education benefits provided for veterans to receive either a higher education or specific training to work in a specific industry” (Scott, C., 2010, n.p.). Positive support, such as a community of fellow veterans, family, and friends during the transition to higher education can help student veterans in fulfilling their academic goals less stressfully (Ryan, et al., 2011).

Service members utilize existing education, career, and transition services as they prepare to leave the active duty military and enter institutions of higher education. This is an important transition period as they prepare for life as a civilian and for some, becoming a student veteran. Once they have arrived at a college or university, 65% of respondents in the 2012 ACE survey indicated they used transition assistance programs available at their institutions, while 34% used them rarely or not at all (McBain et al., p. 44).

Military training and experiences can both prepare or neglect to prepare Marines transitioning to civilian life. Transition programs for military service members will need to be supported to make the transition successful. Securing a civilian job upon departure from active duty status is a major concern for service members transitioning to civilian life. Less than 10% of enlisted service members hold bachelor’s degrees (Clemens, 2008; Ryan et al., 2011). Military education and training oftentimes do
not easily translate to civilian skills, occupational knowledge and work experience (Brown and Gross, 2011; ACE 2008). In addition, most veterans are unable to translate their military education and experience into specific knowledge, skills and abilities, which are sought out in the civilian workforce. Thus, it is imperative that transitioning programs be made mandatory for separating service members and that the programs produce outcomes and tools that can be used in veterans’ job search. “Many enlisted service members entered the military following high school graduation and, therefore, have never experienced post-graduation civilian work” (Clemens, E. & Milsom, A., p. 248). Consequently, veterans entering the civilian workforce are for the most part, not prepared to make career and education decisions.

In March 2012, the U.S. Marine Corps replaced its mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP) with the Transition GPS to be compliant with the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act. This revision was designed to strengthen the TAP Program and incorporate partnerships with the VA, Departments of Labor and Education, and the Small Business Administration to insure service members were career ready when they separated from active duty. In turn, an important goal of the program was to reduce the unemployment rate of veterans, which has been traditionally higher than the national unemployment rate. The TRS is intended to provide “the right educational and occupational assistance to Marines leaving active duty ranks” (Marine Admin Message 641/12, Nov 2012). The TRS program is a weeklong program for Marines who are within twelve months of separation from the Marine Corps. The program consists of a three-day core curriculum, which consists of information related to Veterans Affairs benefits, interview skills, resume building, budgeting and personal finance, and job applications. Marines complete a pre-separation checklist, a 12-month budget, an opportunity to continue their military service, an individualized transition plan, and a Department of Labor certificate to use at career centers. In addition to the three-day core curriculum, Marines choose from four different pathways: College/University; Career/Technical; Employment; or Entrepreneurship Pathway. Each of the
pathways assist Marines in furthering their goals upon separation from the military depending on what their plans are once they leave the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa is responsible for administrating the College/University Pathway. Three Transition Readiness Instructors are employed by the Voluntary Education Program to administer the TRS pathways to a Marine Corps camp each week. The pathways are 4 hours in length and consist of interactive presentations, assessment tests, research, and work on the computer utilizing numerous websites and databases. The goal of the Transition Readiness Seminar is to prepare Marines to enter civilian life with a prepared plan to assist them with the tools and resources they need to be successful in their transition, regardless of the path they choose to take.

Incorporating the research of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory can assist the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program in understanding the needs of Marines to make a successful transition from military service to college and to assume dual identities as a veteran and as a college student (Rumann and Hamrick, 2010; Ryan, et al., 2011). Integrated services, educational benefits, student adjustment and school and community relationships will need to be explored to further the body of knowledge for this research. With virtually non-existent research in the military’s voluntary education programs, additional knowledge in reference to how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program can be designed to provide services in the future to meet the critical education, career, and transition needs of Marines was explored.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

A review of the literature confirmed the need to better prepare service members who planned to enter college prior to leaving the military. Although educational benefits for veterans have been offered since the end of World War II, little research has been done and published on the needs of service members as they transition from the military and become student veterans. With the end of the long war in the Middle East, military services are scrambling to prepare service members to transition out of the military and be prepared as productive citizens as the military services downsize and service members pursue employment or their educational goals. Campuses across the nation have been working to assist veterans for years. More recently, literature confirmed that institutions are beginning to provide more focused services to veterans as the need for such veteran-specific services will only increase in the future as the military services draw down their active duty populations after the end of the long war in the Middle East. These veteran-specific services include the establishment of student service support offices to address the unique needs of veterans such as veterans’ centers, student veteran academic advisors, veteran-specific student orientations, introductory classes for veterans only, and counseling services that address veterans’ specific needs such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and how to adjust to civilian life and culture. A review of the literature also confirmed that there is little research on assisting service members to be successful in pursuing their higher educational goals prior to landing on college campuses (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Naphan, 2011; Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2009; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995; McBain, et al., 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010; Vance & Miller, 2009; Wise, 2011; Burnett & Segoric, 2009; Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009; Widome, et al., 2011).
What needed to be explored was how military services’ voluntary education programs can prepare service members while still on active duty, for their transition to become college students. In addition, how the military services’ education programs can help service members be better prepared, informed and successful when they arrive on college campuses, rather than feel lost, alone, and unprepared for their new, civilian lifestyle. In order to access this gap in research, this investigation examined how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa currently meets the higher education needs of Okinawa-based U.S. Marines and what additional, programs and services are needed to best prepare them for their transition to civilian life and college.

The problem of practice for meeting the educational needs of Marines transitioning to student veterans was investigated by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. “IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” explains Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M. 2009, p.1). IPA is based on listening and attempting to understand people’s experiences and how they make sense of those experiences. In this study, Marines stationed on Okinawa, Japan were surveyed and Transition Readiness Advisors who are employed in the Marine Corps’ Education Program participated in a focus group to answer the primary research question and sub-questions.

Research Question and Sub-Questions:

1. How can the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education?
   a. How has military training and experiences prepared Marines transitioning to civilian life and higher education?
   b. To what extent does education, career counseling and transition services prepare Marines for transition to civilian life?
Overview of Methodology

A qualitative, research design was utilized by the researcher to help understand Marines’ perspectives during their transition to civilian life as they prepared to begin or resume their higher educational goals, while at the same time, exiting their military careers. By utilizing the IPA method, the Marines’ point of view was solicited with the expectation that it will be used to assist the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program to provide additional services, programs, and academic counseling to help prepare Marines for their transition from the military to a college campus. The role of the researcher in this IPA method was to focus on the Marines’ experiences and determine how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program can improve and best prepare Marines for the transition of separating from military service and entering institutions of higher education.

In this study, a two-part survey was emailed to Okinawa-based Marines to gather data regarding current usage of the services provided for education, transition services, career planning, and participants’ experiences and opinions regarding existing services in their preparation to become student veterans. In addition, various DoD personnel who assist Marines in the transition process on Okinawa were interviewed in a focus group setting to gain their first-hand knowledge regarding Marines’ experiences in the Transition Readiness Seminar and their interpretation of the services and programs needed for this transitioning population in the Marine Corps. The researcher’s own knowledge and experiences as the Marine Corps’ Education Services Officer on Okinawa was taken into consideration and utilized for this study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The IPA methodology provides a qualitative approach to the study of what happens to Marines (from their point of view) as they transition from the Marine Corps to become civilians and ultimately student veterans. Qualitative research is the “assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical
lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). This research focused on how to prepare Marines in their transition prior to leaving the military and going to college. The IPA approach is best suited to understand the Marines’ experiences from the time they make the decision to leave the military, through their experiences in planning or not planning for their future, through the process of attending the Transition Readiness Seminar, and subsequent individual or group counseling they receive from the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program as they transition out of the Marine Corps and into civilian life.

The IPA approach helped the researcher focus on the experience, perceptions, and interpretation of the Marines’ transition experiences. IPA is idiographic, in which “it wants to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, and what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them” (Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., p. 3). Marines were pre-screened by the education program guidance counselors were provided an anonymous, electronic survey via Survey Monkey to determine what their individual experiences were with the Marine Corps Voluntary Education Program as they transitioned out of the military. Marines completed a questionnaire to provide their perception of the central research question – How can the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education? For most Marines, this transition will be the most significant transition they experience in their lifetime. As indicated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, “When people are engaged with an experience of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections” (Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., p. 3). The survey enabled the Marines to reflect on their transition from active duty to becoming students and they were afforded an opportunity to provide first-hand accounts of their experiences while serving in the Marine Corps and their hopes and concerns for the future as they transition to civilian life and become college students.
Setting and Access to Participants

Marine Corps Base Camp Smedley D. Butler is a major component of the Marine Corps population in Okinawa, Japan with approximately 13,117 active duty Marines, of which 79% are under the age of 30 years. The participants for this study were identified by guidance counselors and transition readiness (TRS) advisors employed by the Marine Corps’ six Education Centers on Okinawa. The education center personnel were provided with the desired demographics of the Marine population for this study by the researcher, which were: first-term Marines stationed on Okinawa from various ethnicities and genders, and who were within 3-12 months of separating from active duty service. As guidance counselors and transition readiness advisors provided briefings or held one-on-one counseling sessions with Marines, qualified Marines who met the demographic requirements of the study were asked to participate in the anonymous, online survey. The Marines self-identified in their meetings with the education center personnel that they were departing the Marine Corps within a 3-12 month timeframe and intended to go on to college once they departed the Marine Corps. The Marines in this pre-screened group were considered to fit the demographics of this study as transitioning Marines. The researcher then received a list of email addresses from the education center personnel and sent an email to invite fifty Marines to complete an online, anonymous survey through Survey Monkey. The survey email identified the researcher, the researcher’s position within the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa, the reasons for the study, and the assurances that the participants’ identities would be kept confidential. Approximately 50 Marines were sent an email invitation to participate in the study from January through June 2014.

Survey Items

The online survey that was emailed to participating Marines was designed to provide answers to the research question and sub-questions in order to best prepare Marines on Okinawa for their transition
to civilian life and college. The first group of questions served to determine: (1) Marines’ college experiences up to this point, (2) reasons why Marines chose to leave the Marine Corps and go to college, (3) determine whether or not Marines had a roadmap or plan for the next 5-10 years of their life, (4) determine what types of transition issues they expected to encounter, and (5) determine what their concerns were regarding the transition from the Marine Corps to civilian life and college. These questions served to identify the first-hand issues, concerns, and gaps of knowledge that Okinawa-based Marines identified as they began their transition to civilian life. This information is useful in building upon existing services that the Marine Corps Education Centers currently provide on Okinawa. One example is the issue of fitting in on a college campus. This issue can be discussed in a group or individual counseling session with Marines in order to best prepare them for the culture shock that many will encounter as they take freshman college classes with recently graduated high school students and find themselves very different from traditional-aged freshmen due to age and life experiences. The survey participants on Okinawa alluded to this by anticipating culture shock and the ability to fit in on a college campus. This issue has been raised by service members on college campuses, which resulted in various veteran-specific services such as veteran student orientations and freshmen introductory courses for veterans being established to serve this unique population of college students.

The second set of questions served to identify: (1) whether or not Okinawa-based Marines utilized the Marine Corps Education Centers on Okinawa, (2) their knowledge of the services available to them to meet their educational and career goals, (3) whether or not they had previously met with a guidance counselor or attended an educational brief, and (4) what types of services they would like to see offered by the education program that would assist them in preparing for college. These questions served to determine to what extent Marines on Okinawa knew about the resources and services available at the education centers and whether or not they took advantage of the services prior to their last year serving in the military as they prepared to transition out of the Marine Corps. These questions also
served to identify to the education program the additional outreach opportunities that may not currently be utilized to help promote the education program and to reach Marines early in their tours on Okinawa. Oftentimes, once Marines are briefed on the services available to them as they arrive on Okinawa, they then start a rigorous training cycle, which includes frequent off-island trainings and deployments to other countries, and prevents them from taking advantage of their free, educational benefits during their off-duty hours. Thus, it can be somewhat difficult for Marines to visit the Education Centers on Okinawa to get the assistance they need to prepare for college while on active duty or beyond as civilians. Marines surveyed indicated that awareness of educational services could be improved and that their own assumptions of military credit transferability and timeline for planning for their transition was of concern.

The third set of questions on the survey served to identify: (1) how Marines’ military training and experiences helped prepare them for their transition to college and civilian life, (2) their suggestions on reaching Marines early in their tour on Okinawa, and (3) an open ended question on other thoughts and issues they wished to share in relation to the study. These questions were asked to determine how the Marine Corps Education Centers on Okinawa could better educate Marines about transferability of military credit, marketing the education program to Marines on Okinawa, and other issues and/or concerns they identified to best prepare Marines to transition to civilian life and college.

Approximately 50 potential participants were sent an electronic survey by the researcher, of which eleven Marines responded. The low participation rate may be attributed to the researcher’s invitation email going to junk mail, bad email addresses, or Marines being overwhelmed with emails from unknown sources and failing to respond to them. It was determined, with the concurrence of the primary investigator, to hold a discussion with various DoD personnel who frequently assist Marines in transition and help prepare them for civilian life. The intention of the discussions was to gain their perceptions and feedback of what Marines on Okinawa may need in preparation for their transition to
college. In their daily discussions with Marines, education center personnel learn of issues that relate to transition concerns that can assist the entire education program in addressing services needed by Marines. These suggestions may not necessarily be captured in a formal assessment at the end of a program, but are just as important in identifying holes in the services offered or resources the Marines perceive to be needed in order to assist them in their successful transition and preparation for civilian life and college.

The data collected from both the electronic survey and the focus group discussions proved useful in the determination of how the Marine Corps Education Centers on Okinawa could assist in best preparing Marines for their transition from the Marine Corps to college and civilian life. The data provided first-hand accounts of Marines experiences with the Marine Corps Education Program on Okinawa and identified both strengths and areas to address for future improvements, best practices in developing additional resources, and education center staffing needs to assist Marines in their successful transition to civilian life.

Data Collection

The surveys received from the participants were analyzed to determine emergent themes. Once the emergent themes were identified by the researcher, they were further developed into discussion items for the discussion focus group with various personnel who assist transitioning Marines. The researcher invited the education personnel to discuss their experiences in working with the transitioning Marine population and the types of needs that were identified by the Marines in their transition process. The discussion consisted of nine questions that focused on what the perceptions were of the transition needs of the Marines that they supported and assisted, supplemental education or career-related workshops needed that would be designed to help transitioning Marines to assist them in better understanding the campus layout, financial resources, and supplemental resources such as the Student
Veteran’s of America (SVA), as well as through one-on-one counseling appointments. The questions were derived based on the responses received from the electronic surveys completed by Marines to provide further details about what type of information and services they requested from transition advisors and guidance counselors, the top three concerns of Marines transitioning to college, and additional needs identified from interactions with Marines. The purpose of the discussion was to allow an opportunity for various personnel who assist Marines in their transition to civilian life to reflect and discuss with the researcher, engage in conversations with each other, and to obtain information on the areas of need regarding the programs and services that the Marine Corps Voluntary Education Program can provide in the future as Marines transition to college. Questions were “open-ended and offered relatively neutral opportunities for all participants in the group to engage with the issue under discussion” (Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., p. 72). Focus groups offer an opportunity to hear all participants’ voices and their individual experiences as they share in the group discussion. The discussion was informal and offered an opportunity for open dialog of issues concerning transitioning Marines on Okinawa and ways to address those issues through the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa. This type of reflective discussion is beneficial to both the participants as well as the researcher (who serves as the Marine Corps’ Education Services Officer on Okinawa).

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted an initial analysis of the data with written notes to capture key ideas from the participants that the researcher determined mattered to them. Exploratory commenting such as descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were noted to describe the Marines’ and TRS advisors’ responses, record their specific language, and engage in further discussions (Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., p. 84). These exploratory comments helped the researcher identify what was important to the participants, how the use of language and its meaning were used, and underlying meanings of participants’ responses.
Emergent themes were then identified by “mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith, J.A, flowers, P., Larkin, M., p. 91). The researcher further identified new ideas and concepts obtained from the process of the focus group, derived meaning gained from the experience, and through mapping, determined how the emergent themes connect to one another.

Patterns from participants’ responses were identified to determine important and reoccurring themes in which the researcher provided an interpretation of the participants’ experiences.

Validity

In IPA research, validation determined the quality of the research. There are several qualities that determine validity: the researcher’s understanding of the philosophy of IPA, the researcher’s understanding and interpretation of the problem of practice, the data analysis, the participants’ “essence of their experience,” and the author’s ability to direct the participants’ meanings back to themselves (Creswell, J. W., p. 215-216).

Member checking was utilized by asking participants to review their responses, the data collected and the interpretations to determine the reliability of the data. Member checking “solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, J.W. p. 208).

Clarification of researcher bias is also important to IPA research. As the researcher serves as the Education Services Officer of the Voluntary Education Program for the Marine Corps on Okinawa, the personal bias of the researcher could be expressed. Thus the importance of member checking and triangulation of data was important to this research.

Triangulation of data took place from various information collected through existing survey data and sources of information so that “sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide
corroboration evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” were incorporated in the body of data for the research (Creswell, J.W., p. 208). Data collected from the first year of the Transition Readiness Seminar indicated that Marines on Okinawa who had completed the Transition Readiness Seminar during their final months in the Marine Corps indicated they would have benefited from the information even more if they had received the education planning and education resource information early in their tours on Okinawa. An overwhelming number of the Marines indicated that the Transition Readiness Seminar’s Education Pathway was helpful to them in the transition to civilian life and their intention to go to college.

The protection of the research participants was accomplished through the confidentiality of their personally identifiable information and anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and personal experiences and opinions. The initial electronic survey did not ask for the Marines’ identifying information. The Marines were screened initially by education center personnel, and prior to receiving the invitation to participate in the electronic survey. All participants were provided Web Based Informed Consent Form at the time they were invited to participate indicating their responses would be kept confidential.
Chapter Four: Presentation of Data and Research Findings

Introduction

There were two purposes for this investigation. The first was to understand how the Marine Corp’s Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa could best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education. The second was to examine how military training and experiences, career counseling, education and transition services helped prepare Marines transitioning to civilian life and higher education.

Research Questions and Sub-Questions

The following were the study’s research questions:

1. How can the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa best prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education?

   a. How has military training and experiences prepared or neglected to prepare Marines transitioning to civilian life and higher education?

   b. To what extent does education, career counseling and transition services prepare Marines for transition to a civilian life?

Data Analysis

In this qualitative methods study, a thirteen question online survey (Appendix A), was used to gather qualitative data regarding four themes: (1) Marines’ reasons for separating from the Marine Corps; (2) Marines’ readiness to attend college after the Marine Corps; (3) Marines’ perception of the level of service they received from the mandatory Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS), the Education Program, and its personnel; and (4) Marines’ perceptions regarding the types of services needed for future Marines on Okinawa who will be departing active duty and becoming student veterans.
**Textual Coding** – Through the use of textual coding, the Marines’ experiences and perceptions as it related to the four themes of the online survey were analyzed. The textual coding provided categories in which the Marines’ experiences in the Marine Corps, their educational experiences thus far, and their perceptions of readiness, helped form the framework to understand their transition from the Marine Corps to Student Veterans. It also provided emergent themes as to how the Marine Corps Education Program on Okinawa could assist in decreasing Marines’ concerns regarding readiness, planning, and preparation for their transition.

**Contextual Coding and Emergent Themes** – Through the emergent themes that developed from the survey, the information provided by the participants gave them an opportunity to express in their own words their experiences as they transitioned from the Marine Corps to college student. In doing so, the interpretive phenomenological approach was utilized so that the Marines could describe their lived experiences. The emergent themes included the need for solid preparation for college and civilian life, the need for proper and timely academic planning, and the need for increased marketing of the education program to reach more Marines and earlier during their tour on Okinawa.

**Survey**

A total of eleven Marines responded via Survey Monkey to the survey invitation over the course of four months (January – April 2014). The researcher and the primary investigator determined the sample size was adequate to meet the needs of the study. Each participant was asked to read a web-based, online informed consent form where participants were assured of their privacy. The survey questions attempted to zone in on the specific needs of Marines who were transitioning to college and consisted of thirteen questions, related to four topics regarding (1) Marines’ college experiences, (2) their reasons for separating from the Marine Corps and going to college, (3) their transition experiences, (4) their knowledge of the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program and services, and (5) their
thoughts and suggestions on how the education program could reach Marines on Okinawa to assist them with their educational endeavors.

Marines who attended a Transition Readiness Seminar or other education brief were initially invited to participate in the online survey. Email addresses were collected for willing participants who met the demographics of the survey and the researcher followed-up with an invitation and link to the online survey with an attached Web-Based Informed Consent Form.

For the discussion group, education center personnel who work with transitioning met with the researcher to discuss their observations in working with Marines on the types of issues that frequently voiced by the Marines in transition. The education center personnel who assist transitioning Marines at the Marine Corps Education Centers on Okinawa provide education-specific briefs on transitioning to college, numerous education-related briefs, in addition to one-on-one counseling sessions to individual Marines. Nine questions were asked in the discussion group session that provided additional information from education center personne’s first-hand experience providing Marines one-on-one transition counseling and conducting the Transition Readiness Seminars and other education briefs (Appendix B). The topics included (1) the employees’ perceptions of the Transition Readiness Seminar and the supplemental education workshops they provide, (2) the top 3 concerns Marines had as they transitioned to college, (3) questions and clarification most likely needed by Marines, (4) programs and services recommended, (5) Marines’ perception of going to school while on active duty on Okinawa, and (6) suggestions and information shared by the TRS advisors. The discussion group lasted one hour and the researcher and the education center personnel engaged in a meaningful dialog to reflect on what Marines separating from service are indicating are issues that arise during their transition.

Results
The data findings presented below summarize the emergent themes from the Okinawa-Based U.S. Marines surveyed for this research study. The qualitative research design was utilized using the phenomenological approach to identify Marines’ understanding of their experiences in the Marine Corps, how those experiences, along with the education center helped Marines to prepare for their transition from the Marine Corps to become a student veteran, and their interpretation of this journey.

Themes emerged as the Marines’ survey results were analyzed: (1) reasons for separating from the Marine Corps; (2) readiness to attend college after the Marine Corps; (3) level of service and benefits received from the education center and its personnel; and (4) needed services for future Marines assigned to Okinawa who are departing active duty and transitioning to become student veterans.

Marines’ responses shed light on their experiences while stationed on Okinawa and their growth as a result of it. They also provide insight on reasons why some Marines chose to attend college classes while on active duty in the Marine Corps, while others did not. In addition, the importance of planning, utilizing existing educational resources early on during their tour on Okinawa, and insuring the word gets out to Marines on the availability of educational resources and opportunities on island is of significant importance to insure Marines are prepared for transition out of active duty service.

**Reasons for Separating from the Marine Corps**

*Drawdown in the Marine Corps* – As described in Chapter 1, the Marine Corps is expected to drawdown its active duty population from 202,000 during the height of the war in the Middle East to 174,000 by 2017 (Feickert, A., January 9, 2014, p. 1). This is due to the end of the long war in the Middle East and military budget constraints. Due to the drawdown, Marines who for one reason or another do not succeed in being promoted in rank, have less than perfect military records, or whose Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) is decreasing, are being involuntarily separated from active
duty. The data findings reflect eleven Marine survey respondents who are currently stationed on a Marine Corps base in Okinawa, Japan.

**College Experiences of Marines Stationed on Okinawa, Japan:**

I dropped out of college just before the end of the first semester of my senior year at Northeastern University. I also have taken a number of courses at a local community college (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I have begun my bachelor’s degree program using tuition assistance and am currently in progress. No college experience before the military (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

Two online classes, I felt like I was wasting my time (Personal communication, January 25, 2014).

I have used military tuition assistance since 2012 in order to pursue an online degree. Up to this point I have completed 75 credits and I have 45 to go for my BA in Environmental Studies through Ashford University (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

I was able to apply to the college of my choice thanks to the help of the instructors. I got my acceptance letter this week (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

I have never taken college courses (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

One college credit course in high school (Personal communication, April 12, 2014).

Marines on Okinawa vary in their overall college experiences. Some Marines have college credit prior to enlisting in the Marine Corps while others have never attended college classes. As such, there are varying degrees of knowledge amongst the Marine Corps population who seek assistance at the Marine Corps Education Centers on Okinawa. Education Program staff must query the Marines through one-on-one conversations to determine their level of knowledge first before they begin to assist them with their educational goals. All Marines must attend a one-hour Marine Corps Tuition Assistance/College 101 brief prior to being provided tuition assistance. During this brief, they are provided an overview of the education process, how to use their tuition assistance benefits, and their responsibility to earn passing grades in order to avoid reimbursement to the government for the tuition assistance funding. The components of a degree are discussed with them such as general education classes, core classes and elective classes. The Joint Services Transcript (JST) is reviewed to inform
Marines how their military credit is posted and evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE) recommended credit, and information regarding how to choose a college and major is discussed. The Marine Corps tuition assistance benefits can be obtained only after Marines satisfy 24 months of active duty service, have a 2.0 GPA or higher, have completed all professional military education and training requirements, and meet certain testing requirements (Appendix C). Online assessments, such as College Navigator, Kuder Journey, the Online Academic Skills Course (OASC) and O-Net are utilized by education staff to determine Marines’ interests, abilities, and potential majors to pursue. These online assessment tools are utilized in all the Transition Readiness Seminars as well as in individual counseling sessions between Marines and education program guidance counselors and transition advisors. They are designed to capture information about a student based on how they answer questions in the assessments, and then generate a list of potential careers and education needed to obtain those careers. They also assist students on locating colleges and universities based on their geographic preference, selected major, and/or college type (e.g. two-year, four-year, public or private institution). These assessment tools further assist Marines in determining what their educational interests are, how those interests translate into a program of study, what type of institution they are best suited for, and assists them in selecting several options for colleges and majors.

**Marines’ Decision to Leave the Marine Corps and Become College Students** - In responding to the survey question of why they decided to separate from the Marine Corps and become a college student, two respondents indicated the decision was involuntary.

I didn’t, I tried to reenlist but they didn’t let me due to cutting down numbers. Never been in trouble (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

Involuntary separation. I intended on using the TA option up to this point and then using my Post 9/11 GI Bill supplemented with any reservist service kicker bonuses (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).
The fear of the prospect of being involuntarily separated from the Marine Corps at a later time in one’s career is also a factor that plays in the Marines’ decision to leave active duty service earlier, rather than later when the potential for a significant transition would be much more difficult to manage. As the Marines surveyed are within their first four years of service, they are typically younger, unmarried, and have few responsibilities outside of the Marine Corps. If they were to reenlist for another four years of service, the eventual transition is perceived to be more difficult as they would be older, may have additional responsibilities such as a wife and family, or perceive that the transition would be more difficult to leave the Marine Corps and start another career at a later date. Some Marines have determined that they would much rather make the decision to leave on their own rather than the Marine Corps making the decision for them in the future.

I am separating from the Marine Corps because I feel like the current climate with the drawdown makes it too risky at my age to try to stay in. A lot of the best Marines I know are getting forced out or are leaving because they think they will be forced out, and there are rumors about things going on that will make it easier for people to get passed over at the staff level and forced out. I don’t want to be in my mid thirties without a college degree, job prospect, or enough time in service to retire. I want to go to college because I’ve always felt bad about not completing college and wanted to get a degree, and I feel like since I have the GI Bill and so many (hopefully) transferable credits, it would be foolish for me not to take advantage of that (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

**Education and Professional Development Goals** – Several of the Marines surveyed indicated they had completed some college coursework prior to enlisting in the Marine Corps and had always envisioned themselves earning a college degree. Education, professional development for future career opportunities, and personal goals were other reasons Marines indicated they were separating from the Marine Corps.

I wish to pursue other endeavors in life and I also want to be able to devote all of my time and attention to it, instead of trying to share my time with the Marine Corps (Personal communication, April 14, 2014). I have always wanted to pursue college education; I feel that the Marine Corps has taught me very valuable life lessons and I’m ready to do something different (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).
To further my education and professional development (Personal communication, April 19, 2014).

Working with only high school (education) and USMC training will not get me the job I want (Personal communication, April 12, 2014).

**Discontent with the Marine Corps Lifestyle** – Marines who were discontent with the military lifestyle on Okinawa provided descriptive information. This may be attributed to the strict rules applied to young servicemembers assigned to Okinawa as a result of high profile crimes committed in the past that gained national and international attention (e.g. sexual assaults, driving under the influence, or crimes against Japanese nationals). The most publicized case of these crimes occurred in 1995 when two Marines and a Sailor were convicted of beating and raping a 12-year-old schoolgirl in Okinawa. This case resulted in public outrage by the Okinawan people, followed by anti-American demonstrations that occur to this day as the debate over the presence of U.S. forces on Okinawa continues. There have been several more sexual assaults on Okinawa since then that have also made international headlines, which continue to exacerbate the tensions between the U.S. and Japan. These crimes, which often play out in cities and towns across the U.S., are magnified in Japanese media and cause a strain in U.S.-Japan political relations. As a result, junior Marines in the lower ranks (regardless of their age) are severely restricted in their freedoms. The Marines have a curfew, must go off-base in pairs, are restricted from owning a private vehicle, and are restricted from drinking off-base. These are privileges they normally have at any other installation in the world.

First off, I’m tired of being treated like a child because of my rank. The orders for liberty as well as licensing in Okinawa are my favorite examples (dependents included in this). Also, disorganization and decline of respect and discipline I have seen since I enlisted is unsat and people like me can only do so much. I have no desire to be apart of a Marine Corps where the backbone (NCO’s) have been stripped of the authority and respect they earned, assuming they actually earned it. There’s a reason social media pages like JTTOTS and PBF exist. Too hopefully keep ALL Marines (not just junior or enlisted) in line when they think of being nasty and talking on their cell while walking, wearing an American flag like it’s a prop for a photoshoot, or going out anywhere with a jacked up uniform especially if they are not even supposed to be wearing it on liberty. I decided to become a college student because nowadays, a college education is very important for employment, as well as salary. Plus, I’m stupid not to use my GI bill. It’s free college at any state college (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).
Marines’ Perception of Their Readiness to Attend College

**Availability of a Roadmap** – Most Marines surveyed indicated they had some type of roadmap or plan for the next five to ten years of their life. Those that did indicate they had a roadmap indicated that education was a part of achieving their goals.

Within the next five years I hope to have a bachelor’s in biology and working my way towards a higher degree in the biomedical field (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I do, I plan on getting my Bachelors in Electrical Engineering and then go for my Masters and become a Professor at a State University and also be a Personal Trainer on the side (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

I would like to see myself completing my MS in Environmental Science and entering into a related job field, whether it be an Environmental Protection Specialist or Environmental Field Scientist (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

Yes, I want to be a fire fighter (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

**Types of Transition Issues Expected** – There were three areas of concern in regards to Marines’ perception of transitioning from the Marine Corps to a college or university: financial, transferability of credit, or other transition issues such as fitting in, culture shock of being a civilian again, and being responsible for one’s living arrangements, transportation and insurance. Marines, like other service members, have most of their living arrangements, health needs, and food needs taken care of. There are no decisions to be made on selecting a health care provider, selecting health insurance or health insurance deductibles, and most live on a military installation in a rent-free dormitory provided to them. Once those benefits are no longer available as they transition to being a civilian, all those decisions need to be made for the first time in their lives as most service members leave their parents’ home at 17 or 18 years of age and then enter the military, without having to find an apartment, provide food on the table, or determine their health care providers. When service members transition out of the military, decisions like these can be an added stress on them due to the fear of the unknown.
I expect money to be tight mainly because of finding a good place to live as well as only having one source of income (my wife), if that at first. To add to the financial issues we also have to worry about transportation insurance expenses (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

My biggest concern at the moment is getting back into a classroom mindset, since it has been nearly a decade since I have had formal schooling (Marine Corps training does not feel quite the same as what I expect college to require of me). Also, I can imagine there being a little bit of adjustment required as far as my expectations for those around me (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Because I am pursuing a degree through a university that in the past is notorious of providing bad experiences to students, I expect that when transferring to a local school I will have to retake many classes in order to fulfill that particular school’s requirements. Also there will be a noticeable break in schooling/funding as I wait for my GI Bill request to be approved (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

The move from Okinawa to the US will be a challenge in itself, but there’s also getting housing where I move to, getting enrolled and prepared for school, managing my time properly for studying and work, and getting adjusted to being on my own and having an entirely new set of responsibilities and freedoms (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

**Concerns Regarding Transition to College** – Marines indicated that their concerns related to finances, adapting to college life, being a college student, and job concerns were most worrisome in their transition to college.

Basically having to start doing everything for myself such as buying food, paying rent/utilities, having a steady source of income, and then getting adjusted to school again because it will have been about 5 years since I was in school (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Funds to support my family. I do not like the idea of finding a job for two to three months and then putting in my two weeks notice so that I may go to college as a full time student. Given my particular situation the BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing) I will receive for the college I intend to go to will support my family through rent and other expenditures. My wife will also be finding a part-time job to supplement our income as well (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

Communicating with normal people. I’ve been around Marines for so long that its going to take a minute getting used to being around fat civilians (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

How will I do in some classes after being away from school for so long? Specifically math and English courses (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

I think my largest concerns are finding a way to complete college while also pursuing my desired career, and finding a way to use the GI Bill as efficiently as possible (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).
Financial issues, housing issues, and entering or returning to an academic mindset weigh heavily on the minds of Marines preparing to transition out of the Marine Corps. These areas of concern provide an opportunity for transition services and the education program to provide more education and planning tools to meet the needs of Marines to alleviate these perceived concerns.

**Preparation Received from Military Training and Experiences** – Some of the positive aspects that Marines indicated military training and experiences have prepared them for civilian life include leadership, discipline, and the perception that they are a better person and able to be more successful.

I think my military training has helped me with my discipline and work ethic, which was one of the things that I believe probably needed improvement on prior to my service. Based on what I have seen on the transfer student information at the schools I am looking at attending, I don’t think any of my training will actually transfer as credit, but I think the military as a whole has helped me improve as a person and will make me more likely to succeed. As far as civilian life in general, I think the Marine Corps has made me into a better person, which is something that I think will help me be more successful in life in general, both in being a better citizen, supervisor at a job someday, and role model to those around me, as well as help me to deal with any sort of adversity that I may encounter and overcome it, or just tolerate minor annoyances more easily (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I am a more well-rounded and desirable future student and employee (Personal communication, January 27, 2014).

My primary MOS is as a 3521 Diesel Technician and I have completed my Journeymanship Program through USMAP (United Services Military Apprenticeship Program). Although I am pursuing a degree through the Environmental Field I feel confident that if I fail on a significant level I will still be able to fall back on my training and experiences (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

It has prepared me enough. I know I will be fine once I get out. I’m really excited for what’s next in life for me (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

Military police helps in getting a job in the civilian world as a cop (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

A minority of Marines surveyed, indicated that they did not receive any benefits from their military training and experiences to prepare them for transition to civilian life and college.

Very little. Most of my military training has been cramming a lot of knowledge in a short timeframe, but only having to regurgitate it word for word instead of actually understanding it. They attempt to have you demonstrate an understanding through “prac-apps” but passing prac-apps doesn’t always ensure understanding (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).
Marines’ Perceptions Regarding the Level of Service They Received from the Education Center

Marines’ Knowledge of the services provided by the Marine Corps’ Education Centers – The services identified by Marines that the education center and personnel could assist them with were mainly tuition assistance and financial resources, with overall positive experiences received.

The education center provides the means to get TA, take CLEP and DSST, and provided many more resources to assist in educational desires/needs (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I learned about applying for financial aid, also learned about the VA and how easy it is to get a hold of a representative near my school (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

Tuition assistance, CLEP, DANTES, tutors, advisors, on base colleges are all things provided that are there to help us get started, finish, or transition and work toward a degree. Not to mention all the references to informational websites that can be provided and be of a huge assistance when choosing a school (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

This past year we have faced sequestration and a government shutdown, which has prevented me from using TA. Often I came into the MCAS Futenma Education Center to ask about information pertaining to these situations and Mrs. Roberta Sanders has been a great professional that has helped me along in my educational career. I have had very good experiences with my base education office (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

They can help you with anything from finding a college/career path to applying for schools and registering for your benefits (Personal communication, April 19, 2014).

The services they provided are great, I went there not knowing too much and they explained to me what I could and couldn’t do (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

Great services just impossible to get command to let me go when I need to (Personal communication, January 25, 2014).

Other Marines indicated they did not know much about the services provided by the education centers as they had not visited the education center previously.

To be honest, I don’t know very much. I know that there are counselors available for meetings, and that the college courses that are available are usually taught at the Education Centers. I never really bothered to learn more, because at the time, I had incorrectly assumed that I had enough transfer credits that I would not actually need to take any college courses with TA while I was in Okinawa. Many of my co-workers have used TA and taken college courses while they were out here, though, and have had good things to say about the Education Center as a whole, so I know that they’re doing good things over there, for what that’s worth (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).
There is an opportunity and a need to increase marketing of the program beyond conventional venues already utilized such as social media, email announcements, contacting unit education officers, community service coordinators, flyers, newspaper ads, and posting on marquees. Word-of-mouth is oftentimes effective as the Education Program staff have encountered on numerous occasions Marines who visit the education center for the first time and indicate they want to go to particular for-profit institutions, simply due to word-of-mouth from their senior non-commissioned officers (NCO’s) and the fact that they heard the school or particular program was not academically rigorous.

**Marines’ Perception of the Extent the Education Program Assists them in Preparation for Transition to Civilian Life** – Most Marines perceived a positive experience of their experiences with the education program, while others had not made use of the services provided by the education program for various reasons.

TRS (Transition Readiness Seminar), they prepare you and give you all the information you need, great class and great advisers (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

I think the TRS brief that we got from the Education Center counselors was informative and helpful in making me realize some things that I might need to put more thought into, and I think the services they have available are generally helpful if you make use of them (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

The education program is very thorough from what I understand and offers a large selection of resources and help (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Very well. A concrete look at education benefits was appreciated (Personal communication, January 27, 2014).

I have not really made use of the education program yet, but have an appointment scheduled with an education counselor (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

It prepares you for a week that’s all, then right back to being a Marine and everything is forgot (Personal communication, January 25, 2014).

This program is a good tool. But as the saying goes, “You can lead a horse to water but can’t make him drink.” We have all of these benefits and programs available to us to use but most of the time I only see Marines utilizing it because they are self-driven. I am a great advocate for continuing education and I teach all of my Marines on not just TA but my college experience as well as free online courses from Coursera at least to help them get an idea of what it would be like. Nevertheless out of 32 Marines I have, only 3 including myself that are pursuing a degree (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).
Although there is a positive perception of the mandated Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) experience as Marines prepare to transition from the Marine Corps within one year of their departure from service, there is a clear need to reach Marines earlier and on a continuous basis.

*The Extent Transition Services Prepares Marines for Transition to Civilian Life* - Most Marines indicated that transition services helped prepare them for the transition to civilian life. There was concern, however, that the retention of the information received could be lost and the amount of information received in one week of the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) was too much to retain.

I think that’s a case where Marines get what they put into it. The TRS course in general had a great deal of useful information, and while I went in expecting it to be another “check in the box” type of course that would just be a waste of time, I feel like I learned a lot by attending it and am very glad that I did. I think that a lot of the things I am still worried about have either been addressed by the TRS course as well as possible, or are issues that will simply need to be addressed by me, personally, as things come up once I am a civilian again. Just knowing some of the things that I can expect, or that I can start to plan for now, and the services that are available to me within MCCS (Marine Corps Community Services) prior to my EAS (End of Active Service) and through the VA (Veterans’ Administration) as/after I transition is extremely helpful, and I have already scheduled several appointments with various counselors. I think the Marine Corps is doing a good job in providing all of the services that Marines may need in order to be successful in civilian life (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

The TRS class is full of great information but because it is so jam packed into one week, I wasn’t able to absorb nearly as much information as I had hoped and the only thing I could really do was try to take notes and hope that later on I would go back and review them. I didn’t (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

As long as you retain and use the information they give you then you should be good (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

A quick, one-week class that throws a whole mass of new information at us (Personal communication, April 12, 2014).

Retention of information is perceived to be a concern after Marines attend an intense, one-week workshop where information is provided on all topics regarding transition: personal finance and budgeting, resume writing, interviewing skills and employment, VA benefits, and education. The amount of information is perceived to be overwhelming in a short amount of time.
Marines’ Prior Visits to the Education Center, Attendance at Education Briefs, or Meetings with Guidance Counselors – Most Marines surveyed had visited the education center or met with a guidance counselor.

Two walk-in experiences - both extremely helpful (Personal communication, April 19, 2014).

I attended a TA (Tuition Assistance) Brief and the education brief during the TRS course. I have not met with a guidance counselor yet, but I have an appointment for a meeting (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I did go to a GI Bill brief last year. I only saw her once, then I had to deploy (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

I met with a counselor for the TA brief, and did it again a few months later because I never acted on any of it. I met with her twice. Other than that, just the education pathway for TRS (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

I have only attended the mandatory TA class provided (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

The Marine Corps Education Centers on island advertise a monthly calendar of education briefs available to Marines during the duty day (Mondays through Friday, 7:30 am ~ 4:30 pm). The education briefs include topics on Tuition Assistance, Financial Assistance, Scholarships, United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP), Leadership Scholar Program (LSP), Commissioning Programs, and GI Bill briefs. These educational briefs are voluntary and Marines can register to attend them at their leisure. It is up to the Marines’ command to allow them to attend briefs during duty hours. A majority of the Marines who visit the education center do so during their lunch hour (11:30 ~ 1:30).

Marines’ Perceptions of the Types of Services They Would Like to See from the Education Program, Reaching Marines Early During their Tour on Okinawa, and Other Information They Shared Regarding the Study

The Types of Services Marines would like to see from the Education Program to Assist them in Preparing for College – Approximately half of the Marines surveyed indicated that current services at the Education Centers were sufficient and already available and helpful to them. The other half indicated that the Education Centers and VA representative should walk Marines through their processes in their entirety for better understanding.
For the most part, I think that everything that I would want to see is actually already available through the Education Center. The only thing I can think of that might be helpful is if the Education Center were able to work a little bit more closely with a VA rep in order to assist Marines in actually getting everything figured out regarding how they can best use the GI Bill and exactly what benefits will be available/most useful on an individual basis, but I don’t know if that would be totally feasible (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I have personally found the range of services offered sufficient (Personal communication, January 27, 2014).

I think the programs in place are extremely helpful and should be continued (Personal communication, March 9, 2014).

The main service I need from the education program is to walk me through the registration process and more one-on-one assistance. Guidance counselors may provide this, I have not found out yet (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I would like to see an example of the entire process that we would have to do in order to receive our education benefits. Also I would like much more information on the Leadership Scholar Program. Very few Marines know about this program much less what is required of us to complete an application (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

**Marines’ Thoughts on Reaching Out to Marines Early in their Tour on Okinawa** – Most Marines were in agreement that reaching Marines early during their tour on Okinawa was important.

Others indicated that it was unnecessary and that they should enjoy their time on the island as they had plenty of time to spend on their education.

The earlier the better - no one should procrastinate on either side (Personal communication, April 19, 2014).

Have new Marines coming to Okinawa to attend a class about TA (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

I did not take the TRS course until roughly 4 months prior to my scheduled EAS, and I think that I would have been able to benefit from it even more than I did if I had scheduled it somewhere around a year prior to EAS. I think word of mouth in Marines telling other Marines that it is really useful and informative will help to make Marines more receptive to going (personally, before I went, I thought it was just going to be a waste of time like much of the other required training that we get). I did not know what the timeline was that I was allowed to schedule, so getting the word out about that a little more might also help Marines to schedule it sooner and get the most out of it (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I think it is vital to get to Marines early in their tour, but not too early. There’s a lot of information the education center briefs provide, but if you give all the information at once too early, someone who’s still settling in might put it off and then end up never doing it (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).
I think they should be reached out to. They should know just how easy it is to start college and get TA. Sometimes all they need is a little push to apply for a school, I know I did and I wish I applied sooner to use my TA (March 9, 2014).

They need to learn about the USMAP (United Services Military Apprenticeship Program) as soon as possible. In my case the program takes four years at minimum to complete and had I not already reenlisted I would not have completed mine. For a program as good as this, there are very little who actually know what the program is about (Personal communication, January 4, 2014).

I would tell them to do college out here. They have plenty of time to knock it out in advance. I know I would’ve if I knew beforehand (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

This island is great – enjoy it while you’re here (Personal communication, January 25, 2014).

The Education Program provides a one-hour educational brief during Marines’ first week on Okinawa at the mandatory JRC (Joint Reception Center). The JRC is a program where new, single Marines arriving on Okinawa board a bus from the airport upon arrival and are billeted for the evening in a dormitory on Camp Foster. The next day, they attend a full-day orientation where various speakers, including from the Education Program, provide information to them in a large-group format on the services available to them on Okinawa, as well as the policies and procedures unique to Okinawa (e.g. the curfew and restrictions off-base). This brief includes information on the institutions available on island, the tuition assistance process, the availability of guidance counselor assistance for one-on-one educational assistance, and other educational information. It is understandable that a new Marine on island, having just arrived on Okinawa after a 15-24 hour international flight, would still be in the stages of jetlag during their first week on island. However, the mandatory JRC brief is under the jurisdiction of the Marine Corps and the timing cannot be altered.

*Other Comments and Suggestions Provided by Marines on Okinawa Regarding the Study –*

Marines provided additional feedback and suggestions regarding the topic of the study.

I think the TRS course was very useful as a whole, and the instructors were very helpful and knowledgeable. In my case in particular, I didn’t think I would really benefit from using TA to take any college courses while I was in, and only realized my mistake right now, when I’m about to separate. Honestly speaking, I’m not sure if I would have really listened or if there is any way that the education counselors could have gotten through to me back then, since I thought I was
already set and didn’t have anything that I could really learn from them, but if there was a way for them to get in contact with us upon arrival on island to tell us that even if we think we’re set, there still might be some benefit in trying to take college courses or at least start planning while we’re here, that might be useful for the Marines like myself who think we already know it all. After meeting with the education counselors at the TRS seminar, I realized that there is a lot more that I could have learned from them, and I hope there is a way to let new Marines know how good the services are that are available and how much the counselors can help, even if they think that education isn’t something they want to do (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

I’m not entirely sure what all the guidance counselors and the various links provide, but a packet/pamphlet or perhaps website should explain the registration process a little more. Perhaps there already is one, or someone at the education does, but for someone who originally didn’t plan on going to college (like myself) will more than likely be completely lost on getting started with the whole education process (Personal communication, April 14, 2014).

Nothing, this is a good study and I hope it helped (Personal communication, April 16, 2014).

The staff was great. They both genuinely cared about our futures. They only set us up for success (Personal communication, April 13, 2014).

Marines oftentimes have the perception that they will receive an unusual amount of college credit from their Marine Corps Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) which is their career field in the military. This leads them to think there is no urgency to attending to their educational goals. The MOS schools are the training schools Marines attend after they complete boot camp. These schools are where they learn their occupational trade such as infantry, police office, cook, etc. This is one indication why some Marines tend to delay visiting the education center or meeting with a guidance counselor early on during their tour on Okinawa. It is oftentimes those who procrastinate that end up regretting delaying their educational pursuits when they find out later that a college degree is more than a culmination of military credits, but actually a degree plan with several components including general education, core classes, a major, minor, and electives. Most military credit transfers in as elective credit due to the specialized nature of the credit and military credit evaluation recommended through the American Council on Education who evaluate military training schools to determine civilian equivalencies of military training. ACE is the organization that provides the quality assurance and overarching guidance on the evaluation of military credit. Currently, over 2,300 institutions accept and recognize the recommendations from ACE and evaluate military credit as transfer credit for their degree programs.
Most of the credit is recognized as elective credit due to the specialized nature of the credit, but there are some occasions when institutions recognize that the military credit is applicable to a specific degree program’s core requirements. ACE sends evaluators to MOS schools to evaluate credit and recommend civilian equivalencies in college credit. For example, after completing a 12-week Marine Corps recruit training, Marines are recommended by ACE for 8 s.h. of lower level credit as follows: Basic Martial Arts, 2 s.h.; Basic Military Science, 2 s.h.; Land Navigation/Tactical Operations, 3 s.h.; and Orienteering/Adventure, 1 s.h. It is then up to the institutions themselves to determine whether or not they will accept the credit into their degree programs and how the credit is applied.

**Education Center Personnel Discussion Group**

Four education center personnel met with the researcher for a one-hour discussion group to discuss their perceptions of Marines transitioning to college. The education personnel conduct a weekly Transition Readiness Seminar – College/University Pathway, which is a four-hour workshop and the end of the Transition Readiness Seminar week that all transitioning Marines must attend. They also schedule one-on-one counseling sessions to assist Marines with their college applications, review college admissions essays, assist with questions regarding transcripts, school and program selection, housing, transfer credit, and other educational questions or services. In addition, education center personnel provide numerous education-related briefs to Marines on Okinawa on a monthly basis.

The education center personnel were asked nine questions in a group setting with the researcher to determine their perceptions of how the current educational briefs were going, what the top three concerns of transitioning Marines are on Okinawa, frequently asked questions from Marines in transition, Marines’ perception of their ability to go to school while stationed on Okinawa and suggestions provided by the education center personnel for the future way ahead. The following
questions were discussed, followed by a summarization of the responses received from the TRS advisors:

How are the Transition Readiness Seminar and the 2-Day Accessing Higher Education Track going?

The group indicated they would like to see more Marines attend the 2-day Accessing Higher Education track, in which Marines learn in great detail, how to prepare for college, how to choose a college and major, college culture, sources for funding college, in-depth GI Bill information, and how to be a successful college student. Marines do not have enough time left on island to currently attend such sessions and some commands do not let them have time off to attend. TRS advisors send follow-up emails and track attendance for TRS and the 2-day track. Approximately 8% come back for one-on-one counseling appointments following the completion of the DoD mandated Transition Readiness Seminar.

Do you need any materials that you don’t currently have to conduct the Transition Readiness Seminar - College/University Pathway or the 2-Day Accessing Higher Education Track?

Personnel indicated they needed printed 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track handouts that are provided to Marines to take with them on the information covered in the workshop, in addition to a written education plan; professionally designed College/University Pathway packets, Peterson’s and e-Knowledge handouts; and additional computers and laptops.

What are the top three concerns for Marines as they transition to the Marine Corps?

Marines indicated they need assistance and information with managing their finances, how to apply and receive healthcare benefits as they lose their current benefits when they leave the military, their lack of confidence in transitioning to college due to their math and English skills, SAT or ACT test
anxiety, and the cultural changes they will experience while going from being an active duty Marine to being a college student. The Marines also indicated they were concerned about admission and acceptance to their school of choice.

**What are the most frequently asked questions education center personnel receive or clarification needed from Marines on Okinawa?**

Questions concerning the GI Bill such as how the book and tutor stipend work, how to apply for benefits, the basic housing allowance, how to switch schools, and the differences from the Montgomery vs. the Post 9/11 GI Bills are most frequently asked or need further clarification by the Marines on Okinawa.

**What programs or services would the education personnel recommend to help with Marines’ concerns?**

When Marines have specific questions regarding their veteran’s administration (VA) benefits, education center personnel frequently refer them to the VA Facebook page or the VA representative on island. The VA representative serves the military community on Okinawa with VA related questions pertaining to benefits and services. They rotate every six months are frequently not as knowledgeable with the GI Bill as the Marine Corps Education Program personnel. In addition, questions can usually be answered in the transition workshop or through scheduled one-on-one appointments with education center personnel.

**What is the timeframe when Marines are attending the Transition Readiness Seminar?**

Marines indicated the average time between attendance at TRS and their separation from the Marine Corps is currently 2~3 months on Okinawa. There are a few occasions when Marines attend 1~2
weeks if there is a last-minute separation from service pending. This is atypical of the majority of Marines separating from Okinawa.

_Do Marines indicate they can go to school while on active duty? If not, what is stopping them?

Marines indicated they do not have enough time to go to school while stationed in Okinawa. They are on Okinawa for a short amount of time, are deployed to other regions in Asia or the Middle East for military training and exercises, and travel frequently. They also indicate that the 8-week term dates of the contracted schools on island do not work well with their schedule. Some Marines indicated they are not eligible for Marine Corps tuition assistance as they currently do not meet the 24 months in service time commitment required to receive tuition assistance or have low GPAs. Marines also indicated the lack of internet capability while serving on a ship or in the field was an issue that kept them from pursuing their education. Education center personnel commented that the Marines’ mission requirements come first, and that the nature of the mission and the operations tempo gets in the way of Marines attending college while on active duty.

_Comments, suggestions, information shared by Education Center Personnel_

Education center personnel would like to see more Marines attend the 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track. They would also like to create a marketing campaign to advertise their services and send the information directly to commands. They suggested that the 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track should not be optional, but rather a program requirement for transitioning Marines. Lastly, they indicted that attending the 2-day track could be problematic for Marines who have transportation issues on island.

_Findings Conclusion_
In this study on meeting the higher education needs of Okinawa-based Marines, four areas of consideration were determined: (1) reasons for separating from the Marine Corps, (2) readiness to attend college after the Marine Corps, (3) the level of service and benefits received from the education center and its personnel, and (4) needed services for future Marines assigned to Okinawa and planning their transition from the Marine Corps to become a student veteran. The emergent themes of the need for solid preparation for college and civilian life, timely academic planning, and the need to get the word out about the education program in a more efficient manner evolved from the data findings. Marines’ experiences in the Marine Corps, the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS), and their choices made on how they spent their time on Okinawa helped in the understanding of their perceptions of transitioning to college. The data findings have brought to light some of the significant concerns that transitioning Marines face while making the transition in their last year serving in the Marine Corps. These findings will assist the Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa to design appropriate outreach to Marines early during their tours on Okinawa, as well as design additional educational briefs that are unique to the Marines who are separating from active duty and transitioning to civilian life and college.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Overview of Purpose and Method

The significance of issues pertaining to preparing service members for their transition to college and the gap in research pertaining to student veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan war era is confirmed after a literature review. The review also suggests that studies regarding the transition of current military service members from this period while still actively serving in the military is lacking. This area of need in the investigation of preparing military members to transition to college is exposed.

To address this gap in research, the investigation explored how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program could assist Okinawa-Based Marines to best prepare for their transition from active duty service to attend college. It also explored what factors were needed for an effective transition, what services the education program could provide in the transition efforts, and the timeliness of services that affect the overall transition experience for active duty Marines.

Overview of Methodology

This researcher conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach which is a qualitative form of inquiry. In this study, eleven active duty Marines who were completing their first enlistment in the Marine Corps on Okinawa (first four years of active duty service), were invited to complete an online survey consisting of thirteen questions. Marines were pre-screened by Education Program guidance counselors and transition advisors when they attended an education workshop or a counseling appointment. Marines were asked if they would like to participate in the survey that would contribute in the future to the Marine Corps’ Education Program on Okinawa to assist Marines transitioning to college. Once the Marines agreed to participate, the guidance counselor or transition advisor sent a list of their email addresses to the researcher. The researcher then followed up with an
introductory email, a web-based consent form, and a link to the survey, which was on Survey Monkey. Data collection was completed using Survey Monkey.

The researcher conducted textual coding of the survey results in order to categorize the data collected. This allowed for emerging themes to develop based on the responses received: (1) the reasons Marines decided to separate from the Marine Corps, (2) their readiness to attend college after the Marine Corps, (3) the level of service they received from the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program, and (4) services identified as needed for future Marines departing active duty and becoming student veterans.

**Statement of Findings**

There were three purposes for this investigation. The first purpose was to understand how the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program on Okinawa could help to prepare Marines to successfully transition to civilian life and pursue higher education. This investigation confirmed that Marines perceived the education program to be meeting its mission in providing services and resources to help prepare Okinawa-Based Marines. It confirmed that most Marines perceived they were receiving good experiences from the Marine Corps education centers and education center personnel on Okinawa and were familiar with the services they offered.

Another purpose was to explore how Marines’ military training and experiences prepared them to transition to civilian life and higher education. This study revealed that Marines’ perception of how their military training and experiences prepared them for transition to college were in the areas of leadership, discipline, responsibility, becoming a well rounded person, and preparation for future employment. Overall, Marines attributed their short time in the Marine Corps as leading to their future success in life. They felt a sense of accomplishment, discipline, maturity, and the ability to lead. Those who were disenchanted with their military service were in the minority and cited restrictions on
Okinawa (e.g. curfews and off-base restrictions), as well as examples of poor leadership as their reason for discontent.

The final purpose was to understand to what extent education, career counseling and transition services prepared Marines for transition to a civilian life. This investigation suggested that the education program and the mandatory Education Pathway of the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) are currently meeting expectations of Marines on Okinawa. A majority of the Marines surveyed indicated they wished that had access to the information earlier in their career as the services and information they obtained assisted them in their future endeavors. For various reasons, the most common being the fact that Marines had frequent mission requirements that proved to be detrimental in their pursuit of education, the Marines surveyed indicated they could not pursue their higher education while stationed on Okinawa. Further, it confirmed that more Marines on Okinawa could be utilizing their educational benefits and the services offered on island by the Voluntary Education Program to assist them in their transition instead of waiting until the end of their military service commitment to do so. It further confirmed that regardless of the amount of marketing and outreach provided, it is ultimately up to the individual to pursue the use of the existing services until mandated to do so. The findings of the study will be utilized to further improve upon existing resources and services provided by the education centers on Okinawa, as well as provide increased marketing of the educational programs offered on Okinawa.

**Findings**

**First Finding**

*Readiness to Separate from the Marine Corps and Enter College.* A majority of Marines surveyed had completed prior college coursework either before entering the Marine Corps or while
utilizing tuition assistance while on active duty. A small minority indicated they had never taken
college courses or used their tuition assistance benefits.

Almost half of the respondents indicated that they had decided to separate from the Marine
Corps in order to pursue their educational and professional goals with the expectation that they would
thereby secure a better future for themselves. About a fourth of the respondents indicated they were
concerned about the drawdown in the Marine Corps or were being involuntarily separated from the
Marine Corps. These Marines indicated there had not been any negative or disciplinary actions in their
career, but that due to the current climate with the drawdown in the military, they were unable to reenlist
or were concerned that the risks of staying in active duty service would not be in their best interests in
the future. A small minority expressed their discontent with the military lifestyle. Most of this
discontent came from their experiences with leadership, the nature of the restrictions for young Marines
on Okinawa due to the highly political climate of anti-American sentiment against the military forces on
Okinawa, and their dissolution with the current trends in the Marine Corps as it pertains to perceived
unprofessionalism amongst the troops, and some leadership.

When asked about their future plans for the next five to ten years, most Marines responded that
they had a plan or roadmap for the next five to ten years that included both education and a career path.
A minority of the respondents indicated they did not have a definite plan or were considering their
options with the help of the education counselors. The mandatory Transition Readiness Seminars assist
Marines in planning their short-term and long-term goals. At the culmination of the seminar, all
Marines complete an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The ITP is a document where they list their
goals, their college selection choices, their prospective budget for when they leave the Marine Corps,
and their short-term and long-term goals.
When asked about the types of transition issues they expected as they transitioned from the Marine Corps to college, a majority of the Marines expressed concern about finances, while others were concerned about transition issues such as moving from Okinawa back to the United States, the culture shock of becoming a student and adapting to college life, finding a place to live, transportation, taking care of oneself as a civilian, and VA issues regarding obtaining their GI Bill benefits. A few Marines were concerned with the transferability of their military and college credits.

**Second Finding**

*Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program.* Findings related to the helpfulness of the education program and services provided to Marines on Okinawa indicated that a majority of those surveyed received positive experiences when interacting with education center personnel. This suggested that those Marines who took advantage of the services offered by the education centers received more personalized help with their individual circumstances and questions. Another benefit suggests that Marines who took advantage of the services offered or who met with an education counselor were much more likely to have a plan, or roadmap on how to meet their educational goals in the future. A majority of the Marines surveyed had attended a Tuition Assistance (TA) briefing or met with an education counselor prior to attending the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS).

**Third Finding**

*Transition Services.* The College/University Pathway of the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) was also perceived to be a good resource for Marines who intended to go to college. Marines acknowledged this was a mandatory program to attend and indicated that regardless of how good the services were, it was up to the individual Marine to decide to make use of education services unless it was mandated for them to attend. There were also concerns that the retention level of the amount of information received in the one-week transition class was not ideal and that it was difficult for Marines
to retain and utilize the information they received from once the class came to an end. The transition seminar is a one-week seminar held Monday through Friday. All Marines attend the seminar prior to separation from the Marine Corps. The information received on education is condensed into a four-hour timeframe on Friday. This four-hour College/University Pathway serves as an overview of education. More detailed information about pursuing college can be obtained in the 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track, which is voluntary and not part of the mandated weeklong Transition Readiness Seminar. Marines find it very difficult to be able to ask for time off to attend the supplemental 2-day workshop where education information is covered in great lengths in addition to hands-on exercises in finding a college, a major, etc.

**Fourth Finding**

*Military Training and Experiences.* A majority of the Marines surveyed indicated that the greatest benefit they received from their military training and experiences were leadership, discipline, work ethic, and preparation for future employment. The Marines were overwhelmingly positive that their military training and experiences helped them to become more, well rounded individuals and to be a positive future employee or student. A small minority indicated they received little to no benefits from their military training and experiences and that information was “crammed” and training was conducted through endless practice rather than achieving full understanding and knowledge from the training.

**Fifth Finding**

*Outreach and Future Assistance to Marines on Okinawa.* Most Marines indicated that the earlier the education program could reach out to them, the better in order to take advantage of the Marine Corps tuition assistance opportunity and to start planning their educational goals. Marines expressed that getting the education information to them too early or too late was detrimental and that new Marines on Okinawa should attend a tuition assistance class and schedule to attend the Transition Readiness
Seminar one year out from separation from the Marine Corps. A small minority expressed that additional outreach was unnecessary and that Marines should enjoy Okinawa while stationed there and not worry about education during their first term.

When asked about additional services that the Marine Corps education program could provide to assist Marines in preparing for college, most Marines expressed that the program’s services and assistance levels were sufficient and available to Marines. Some respondents suggested that the education program work more closely with the VA to figure out the GI Bill benefits, and to provide step-by-step guidance on applying and registering for college, and the steps to obtain the GI Bill benefits. Additional marketing of the Leadership Scholar Program was also mentioned as a suggestion. Other suggestions from respondents included making the Department of Labor workshop in the Transition Readiness Seminar optional and marketing the United Services Military Apprenticeship Program (USMAP) to Marines soon after arrival on Okinawa. This military training program, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, provides the opportunity for Marines to log in their service hours in specific vocational fields such as electrician, motor transport operator, etc. in order to receive journeyman credentials in a trade to assist with employment opportunities when they depart the Marine Corps. Marines log in their time on the USMAP website and it is verified by their supervisor. If a Marine completes the required hours, he or she will be awarded journeyman status in that career field.

**Findings Tied to Theoretical Frameworks**

As stated in Chapter 1, the Schlossberg Theory of Transition addresses how individuals cope with transitions or changes in their lives. Marines’ concerns related to their impending transition from the Marine Corps to becoming a college student is understandable. Their transition encompasses a shift in culture, career, surroundings, identity and role in society. Most individuals must contend with one transition at a time, whereas the service member leaving active duty service and entering college has a
multitude of transitions to contend with at once. Compounding this is the relatively short timeframe where important, life-changing decisions must be made at a young age. Separation from family and mentors in the United States also adds to the difficulties for Marines in transition.

The Adult Transition Theory also plays a role in the Marines’ pursuit of higher education. As most Marines surveyed indicated that they had completed a few college courses prior to enlisting in the Marine Corps, they had a commonality that existed in them beyond military service. The impact of their future transition played a role in their sudden urgency in obtaining the necessary educational information needed in order to be successful. Schlossberg’s 4S’s: situation, self, support and strategies can be identified in the transition Marines face to meet their educational goals. Their personal transition is the situation they face, their goals and ambition will direct them to seek understanding, support in the form of the education program and programs such as the Transition Readiness Seminar will provide the support they need to reach their goals, and the road map they develop will be their strategy.

The Transformative Learning Theory plays a role in Marines’ process of transitioning to become college students. As a result of education and transition programs in place on Okinawa, Marines who take advantage of the services positively transform from the unknown to individuals with a plan of action to pursue their educational goals. Whether this is by choice or a mandated program such as the Transition Readiness Seminar, Marines benefit from their contact with education professionals.

Another important transformation that takes place as they transition is their changing role as military service member to civilian. Most decisions are made for military service members. As civilians, they need to make most decisions on their own, starting with meeting application and enrollment deadlines, deciding what to study and where, and learning about time management and study skills. This transformative learning takes place as Marines begin to transition into civilian citizens and become student veterans.
Implications for Future Investigation

There is a need for further research related to this investigation on a broader level. On May 22, 2014, the Student Veterans of America (SVA) announced on their website the “Service Member to Student Survey: Veteran’s Perceptions of Transition, Higher Education, and Success.” This study, which is being conducted by Syracuse University in partnership with the Institute of Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), will explore how post-military and their family members pursue their higher educational endeavors. As indicated in the SVA announcement, the “research aims to shine a light on a missing national picture of service members and their families’ experiences in higher education, and explore student veterans’ views on their educational aspirations, opportunities, challenges and barriers” (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, May 22, 2014). The survey seeks to explore veterans’ and military families’ achievements in higher education post-service and to determine best practices for institutions of higher education and supporters of veterans and their families in order to assist with their educational success. Although over one million veterans are utilizing their G.I. Bill benefits to pursue their educational goals, graduation rates for student veterans are lower than the national average (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, November 2013). The information obtained from the survey will serve to further assist veterans and their families achieve their educational goals, increase their graduation rates, better utilize their G.I. Bill benefits, and provide an opportunity for the academic community to provide services and programs to meet the needs of this gap in research on veteran students.

There is also a need to further investigate the existing programs that provide education and transition information and services to Marines on Okinawa, in particular, the Marine Corps’ Voluntary Education Program. This researcher suggests that the education program find more ways to connect to Marines when they arrive on Okinawa. After newly arrived Marines attend the Joint Reception Center briefings upon arriving on Okinawa, it is up to them individually to speak with an education center staff
member at their leisure. Findings suggest that the Education Program could pursue partnerships with staff non-commissioned officers, career planners, the Single Marine Program, and unit leadership to further educate and introduce programs and services for Marines to take advantage of while on Okinawa. The Single Marine Program (SMP) is a program for single Marines that works to provide a voice for Marines in their quality of life needs. Each installation has a SMP Council that works to serve the Marines on the installation and improve their quality of life through the ideas and recommendations they bring forward to the council. Through partnerships, the Voluntary Education Program can forge relationships between unit leadership and the education program, which would hopefully encourage leadership to allow Marines to attend education program briefs, events, meet with educational counselors, and support their enrollment in college classes early during their tour on Okinawa.

Another avenue to help market the services provided by the education center is to spotlight Marines who have successfully utilized the education resources available to them to act as a spokesperson in marketing campaigns for the education program. The education program has begun asking successful applicants to the Leadership Scholar Program (LSP) to participate in the future. The Leadership Scholar Program is a Marine Corps program that introduces qualified Marines to LSP affiliated colleges and universities. The benefits of the LSP program to Marines is that their admission applications are reviewed separately from incoming freshmen applicants as a result of the partnership between the Marine Corps and LSP affiliated schools. The Education Program on Okinawa receives the information on interested Marines who want to pursue the LSP program for admission to colleges of their choice. Upon notification, the Education Services Officer assigns a Marine to one of three Transition Readiness Advisors who then review the Marines application against the college admission criteria and deadlines, assists the Marine in gathering their required military documentation and Joint Services Transcript, then supplies the completed information into the LSP database and recommends the Marine to be moved forward for consideration. The LSP Coordinator who is in the U.S. and works for
the Marine Corps Volunteer Education Program at the headquarters level, will then in turn reach out to admissions officers at the Marines’ school of choice and introduce the applicant for consideration. There have been several Okinawa-based Marines who have been admitted to prestigious institutions such as Columbia, the Ohio State University, and other well-known state universities with the help of Marine Corps Education Center personnel and the LSP Coordinator. This program also benefits the institution as qualified Marines bring their global knowledge, experiences and leadership skills to enhance their campus community.

Additionally, more detailed resources and tools need to be developed on step-by-step instructions regarding obtaining VA benefits, application for college, registering for classes, what options are available to Marines during their first two years of service while they are waiting to be qualified to take advantage of their education benefits, etc. This study suggested that Marines prefer detailed instructions on the way forward rather than merely talking to them about it. One way to accomplish this would be to develop a written chart that indicates what a Marine could and should be doing to progress in their educational goals each of the first four years of their active duty service (e.g. take CLEP examinations, research colleges and majors, attend educational briefs, meet with an academic counselor, etc.). These added resources will be utilized in all briefs, educational counseling sessions, can be disseminated in the Transition Readiness Seminar, and placed on the Voluntary Education Program’s webpage and social media outlets.

Alternate service delivery hours may need to be explored in order to reach Marines who for one reason or another cannot attend regular business hour education briefs or meetings with an educational counselor. Early evening and weekend services may need to be explored. Due to the nature of curfews and driving restrictions for young Marines on Okinawa, taking education services out to the units where they are working may also need to be increased and marketed as an option. Due to the international incidents that have been widely publicized since the 1995 sexual assault incident, coupled with
numerous driving under the influence (DUI) incidents, Marines under the rank of E-5 (which is the lower ranking of the Marine Corps) and who are stationed on Okinawa without their family are restricted from owning a vehicle and driving on island. This puts a burden on the youngest Marines to attend college classes at the education center as the education center is located on the other side of the installation from where the Marines reside. After walking all day to get to work, eat lunch, go to personal training, and to unit briefs, the last thing a Marine on Okinawa wants to do is walk back to the education center during their time off or pay for a taxi both ways to and from class. By providing alternate methods of delivery of educational programming and services such as guidance counseling to Marines on Okinawa, more Marines can take advantage of the services offered without the restrictions of transportation issues or the inability to attend an education brief during working hours.

Since living overseas precludes Marines from attending college fairs in the U.S., providing a college fair for Marines on Okinawa is being explored by the researcher. The college fair would enlist volunteers who are alumni from U.S. institutions to participate in information tables at a college fair for Marines. Materials from each of the colleges would be requested through admissions offices and would be available for handout at the information tables. The event will be held during non-duty hours so that Marines could freely attend and ask questions from alumni serving at their institutions’ information table.

Finally, the need to prepare Marines for the downsizing of the Marine Corps is crucial. Marines should be afforded every opportunity to prepare in a timely manner. This investigation suggests that if given the appropriate tools, guidance, and resources, Marines can and will be successful in planning their future educational and career endeavors.

The Marine Corps’ Transition Readiness Seminar is continuously being evaluated and changing to meet the needs of this generation of Marines transitioning out of the military. A life cycle approach
will soon be incorporated to offer Marines access to information and services from the beginning of their careers and throughout their lifetime. This life cycle approach will incorporate nine touch points throughout a Marine’s career to prepare them for transition when the time comes. During the course of a Marine’s career, they will meet with their career planner, continuously learn about the transition process, develop their Individual Development Plan (IDP) and Individual Transition Plan (ITP), and be introduced to the resources and services available to them for a successful transition. During life changing events, such as getting married or having a child, they will be offered counseling, further develop their family care plans and legal documents, and attend classes available to them such as parenting classes or pre-marriage counseling. By the 12-month mark prior to separating from the Marine Corps, Marines will attend the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) and obtain an in-depth amount of information regarding their future needs during and after transition. By the end of the TRS, Marines will have a finalized Individual Transition Plan in place and have met the requirements for career readiness to include a professional resume, instruction in interviewing skills, job search, and a financial plan for post-service.

**Conclusion**

DiRamio et al., McBain et al., Zinger and Cohen acknowledge that very little research has been conducted on student veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan war era and the need for higher education institutions to prepare for their arrival on campus. Even less evidence can be found of research considering the preparation of active duty service members prior to transition to civilian life and college. Rumann, Hamrick, Clemons and Milson further investigated that the support for veterans in their transition is important as it encompasses career, individual, and relationship transitions, which further complicates the transition process. The military services’ acceptance of what research reveals and creating additional and timely services to transitioning service members is recommended.
Findings of this investigation confirm what recent research has indicated. Marines need to prepare for the transition to college long before they arrive on campus. They need to invest time into the process and help themselves in addition to relying on student affairs professionals in higher education. One way to do so is to utilize the educational services available while they are still in the military to prepare for their futures. The findings of this investigation indicate that time is of the essence in preparing Marines to transition to civilian life and school. Proper planning time is needed in order to prepare for their significant transition ahead and to absorb, retain and follow-through with their planning needs.

This study suggests several remedies to assist transitioning service members. Timely access to Veterans’ Administration representatives and education center personnel is crucial to properly plan for the significant transition service members will embark on. The utilization of VA benefits resources such as the VA Facebook page, VA representative, and scheduling one-on-one appointments with education counselors is recommended. This investigation found that more Marines need to attend the two-day Accessing Higher Education Track and that by making it a mandatory component of the transition seminar, it would help provide the resources needed for service members to be knowledgeable about preparing for college and utilizing GI Bill benefits. There is also a need to increase efforts to communicate programs and services through additional marketing and advertising efforts early in a service members’ career and to also send information directly to commands. There is also a need to further investigate the existing programs that provide education, transition information and services to Marines on Okinawa. More detailed, step-by-step instructions regarding VA benefits, application for college, class registration, and educational options available to Marines during their first two years of service. In addition, alternate service delivery hours need to be explored to provide programming after duty hours when Marines are more inclined to be able to attend and benefit from the resources and services offered through the Education Program.
This investigation also reveals a gap in research, as it suggests that Marines may not have the opportunity to pursue educational resources and services available due to mission requirements that are priority over seeking assistance with transition services. Although the Transition Readiness Seminar (TRS) is a Department of Defense mandated program for transitioning service members, it is still up to the command to allow Marines to attend the TRS one year in advance of separating from active service, which is the ideal amount of time in order to take advantage of all services, education counseling, research and find a college and degree program, meet college application deadlines, and find a place to live.

The continued research of meeting the needs of transitioning service members can be applied to all military services around the globe. The findings of this investigation may assist military education practitioners provide additional, timely, and appropriate services to military service members transitioning to college. A warm hand-off of student veterans to college campuses could improve their chances for retention and success. This investigation could be expanded by partnering military education practitioners with college student affairs professionals to provide an individualized approach to the transition of student veterans. This type of customized services could potentially ease the transition of military members into civilian life and education.

As more student veterans descend on college campuses, additional resources will become available to assist this unique population of students. However, military services’ Voluntary Education Programs can also do their part in providing educational services and counseling to service members to help them to prepare for their transition to college. This investigation serves as a valuable point from which to continue to study the needs of transitional service members.
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Appendix A

WEB SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your college experiences up to this point.

2. Why have you decided to separate from the Marine Corps and become a college student?

3. Do you have a roadmap for where you want to be in the next five to ten years?

4. What types of transition issues do you expect as you transition from the Marine Corps to a college or university?

5. What are you most concerned about regarding your transition to college?

6. Tell me about your knowledge of the services provided by the Marine Corps’ Education Centers.

7. To what extent does the education program assist to prepare Marines for transition to a civilian life?

8. To what extent does career counseling assist to prepare Marines for transition to a civilian life?

9. To what extent does transition services prepare Marines for transition to a civilian life?

10. What types of services would you like to see from the Education Program that would assist you in preparing for college?

11. Have you attended education briefs or met with a guidance counselor at the Education Center?
   a. If so, what briefs did you attend?
   b. How many times did you meet with a guidance counselor?

12. How has your military training and experiences prepared you to transition to civilian life and college?

13. What are your thoughts and suggestions on reaching Marines early in their tour on Okinawa?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about this study?
Appendix B

EDUCATION CENTER PERSONNEL DISCUSSION

1. How are the Transition Readiness Seminar and the 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track going?

2. Do you need any materials that you don’t currently have to conduct the Transition Readiness Seminar – College/University Pathway or 2-day Accessing Higher Education Track?

3. What are the top three concerns for Marines as they transition to the Marine Corps?

4. What are the most frequently asked questions education center personnel receive or clarification needed from Marines on Okinawa?

5. What programs or services would the education personnel recommend to help with Marines’ concerns?

6. What is the timeframe when Marines are attending the Transition Readiness Seminar?

7. Do Marines indicate they can go to school while on active duty? If not, what is stopping them?

8. Comments, Suggestions, information shared by education center personnel.