

Impact of Military Lifestyle on Military Spouses' Educational and Career Goals

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The military lifestyle imposes unique challenges for military spouses in regards to their education and careers. To help alleviate these challenges, military spouses are encouraged to pursue portable career paths. This causes one to question whether spouses desire these portable careers and what influences spouses place on pursuing specific educational and career paths. This exploratory study seeks to address these questions by investigating the careers, academic majors, and educational degrees that current military spouse students pursue. Further, the factors that influence military spouses to pursue their career and academic majors are investigated. The results of this study demonstrate that military spouses desire advanced, graduate level degrees that are primarily in the healthcare, business, mental health, and educational fields. Further, genuine interest was the greatest influence on military spouse career and educational paths and the military lifestyle provided the least influence.

Keywords: military spouse, advanced degrees, academic majors, career, impact

In 2012, there were over 2.2 million active duty, Reserve, and National Guard service members with a reported 1.1 million military spouses, two-thirds of whom were spouses of active duty service members (United States Department of Defense, 2013). It is estimated that the military community, comprised of service members and their dependents, make up 1% of the U.S. population (National Military Family Association, 2011). The U.S. military is a completely volunteer force and the Department of Defense (DoD) has recognized that to retain high caliber service members, military quality of life has to be addressed (United States Department of Defense, 2004). One quality of life issue that is garnering attention is military spouse education and employment.

Military spouses routinely face challenges directly linked to the military lifestyle that are often not experienced by their civilian counterparts (National Military Family Association, 2011). These challenges include frequent relocations and service member deployments, both of which have been shown to be barriers to spouse educational advancement (Harrell, Lim, Werber, & Golinelli, 2004; Hayes, 2011; Maury & Stone, 2014; National Military Family Association, 2007). Despite these barriers, military spouses place a high emphasis on their education (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007; Harrell et al., 2004). While a career is also important to military spouses (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007), the recent Military Spouse Employment Report showed that military spouse unemployment rates are doubled compared to their civilian counterparts (Maury & Stone, 2014). The Military Spouse Employment Report also demonstrated that military spouse incomes are significantly lower than those of their civilian counterparts. These findings were supported by the pre-9/11 RAND Corporation study demonstrating increased rates of unemployment among military spouses (Harrell et al., 2004). The RAND Corporation study demonstrated that frequent relocations were the greatest hindrance

to spouse employment.

The DoD has tried to mitigate some of the educational and career barriers that military spouses face through the development of policy and programming. An example of DoD policy includes Directive 1400.33, which states that the military cannot impede a military spouse's employment or educational attainment. Directive 1400.33 also states that a military spouse's career or educational status should not influence the career progression or assignments of service members (United States Department of Defense, 1988). The DoD has also created programming geared towards spouse educational and career advancement, such as the Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA). The MyCAA program was developed to help offset the educational costs for rank eligible spouses for licensure renewals, certifications, and community college tuition (United States Department of Defense, 2009). The DoD has also recommended that military spouses pursue one of the following portable career paths: education, healthcare, financial services, information technology, real estate, and vocational or technical careers (United States Department of Defense, 2009).

To date, very little research attention has been given to military spouse students. Although prior studies have been informative (Harrell et al., 2004; Hayes, 2011; Maury & Stone, 2014; National Military Family Association, 2007), the demographics were often military spouses not currently enrolled in an educational program and do not represent current military spouse students. Therefore, understanding the needs, desires, and influences of the military spouse student population currently enrolled within an educational program is of importance to both the military and institutions of higher education. Additionally, given the high levels of spouse unemployment (Harrell et al., 2004; Maury & Stone, 2014) and the fact that employment is directly related to educational attainment, understanding the educational desires of current

military spouse students is necessary to help bridge the military spouse employment gap. Finally, since military quality of life is directly associated with the retention of high caliber service members (United States Department of Defense, 2004), studying and supporting the military spouse student population is key to maintaining our national security.

Literature Review

Educational Level of Military Spouses

Military spouses place a high emphasis on their education. A 2006 study revealed that 27.1% of military spouses listed furthering their education or training as a goal (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007). This was supported by a National Military Family Association (2007) study demonstrating that 29% and 41% of military spouses surveyed were working towards an associate's or bachelor's degree, respectively. Interestingly, compared to civilian counterparts, military spouses were more likely to have graduated high school, according to a study that evaluated 1990 Census data (Harrell et al., 2004). Further, in 2012 it was reported that 12.2% and 24.7% of military spouses had an associate's or bachelor's degree, respectively (Maury & Stone, 2014).

One theoretical explanation as to why military spouses place a high emphasis on their education is educational assortive mating (Mare, 1991). In educational assortive mating, spouses select partners who have a similar level of educational attainment. Interestingly, service members tend to have a higher rate of high school completion compared to civilians. One study revealed that 79.1% of active duty service members completed a high school degree compared to only 60.1% of civilians, aged 18-45 (Clever & Segal, 2013). Most enlisted service members enter the military before attending college and use various benefits either during or after their service to advance their education (Watkins & Sherk, 2008). These benefits include the

Montgomery and post-9/11 GI Bills, the Military Tuition Assistance (TA) program, and the Service Member Opportunity Colleges program (United States Congress, 2004). The academic aptitude of service members is also high, with 67.5% of enlisted service members scoring above the 50th percentile on the standardized Armed Forces Qualifying Test in 2007 (Watkins & Sherk, 2008). Further, given that officers are required to have completed a bachelor's degree to commission, it is not surprising that a higher rate of officer spouses have completed a bachelor's or graduate degree compared to enlisted spouses (Maury & Stone, 2014). Therefore, educational assortive mating and the fact that service members themselves place a high emphasis on their education is a possible explanation for the strong desire for military spouses to advance their education.

Military Spouse Employment

A 2006 survey revealed that 50% of participating spouses indicated that the reason why they worked was because a career was important or very important to them (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007). This is supported by another report of 90.75% of military spouses surveyed expressing a desire to work (Maury & Stone, 2014). Unfortunately, however, data have revealed that military spouses are more likely to be unemployed compared to their civilian counterparts. In 1990, the unemployment rate of Army spouses was approximately 12% while the unemployment rate for their civilian counterparts was below 5% (Harrell et al., 2004). These findings were supported by a recent evaluation of military spouse employment conducted by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (Maury & Stone, 2014). This study found that in 2012, military spouses aged 18-24 had an unemployment rate of approximately 30%. This was nearly 3 times the unemployment rate of their civilian counterparts. Further, military spouses aged 25-44 had an unemployment rate of approximately 15% while their civilian counterparts

had an unemployment rate of 5%. Interestingly, the unemployment rate of military spouses was still greater than their civilian counterparts when educational level was considered. For example, the unemployment rate of military spouses with a high school diploma was 40.23%, while civilians had a 21.23% unemployment rate. The unemployment rates for military spouses with a bachelor's degree or professional degree were 29.07% and 28.57%, respectively, and only 13.07% and 3.16% for their civilian counterparts. In general, the unemployment rate for military spouses, regardless of educational level, ranged 15.56-46.53%, while the unemployment rates for civilian counterparts ranged 3.16-29.35%.

In addition to higher rates of unemployment, military spouses receive decreased earnings compared to their civilian counterparts. For example, in 2012 the personal income of an active duty military spouse was \$26,230 while the income of their civilian counterpart was \$41,920, a difference of nearly \$16,000 (Maury & Stone, 2014). These findings were in support of a pre-9/11 study that revealed that the hourly wage of military spouses was approximately \$3 less than their civilian counterparts (Harrell et al., 2004). Interestingly, 48% of participating military spouses in a 2006 survey stated that it was important or very important for them to work so that they can provide money to cover basic expenses (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007). This finding was supported by earlier reports revealing that military spouses rank covering basic expenses as the most important reason for working (Harrell et al., 2004). Saving money for the future, avoiding boredom, and personal fulfillment were also highly rated as being reasons why military spouses pursued employment opportunities (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007; Harrell et al., 2004; Maury & Stone, 2014).

Barriers to Military Spouse Education and Employment

The military culture can place demands on military spouses, particularly spouses of

officers and senior enlisted personnel. As discussed by Harrell (2001), Army officer spouses are traditionally expected to support company, battalion, or brigade level units by leading Family Readiness Groups (FRGs). The purpose of an FRG is to serve as a mechanism to support unit service members and families. Further, officer and senior enlisted spouses are also expected to entertain or attend social events and formal military ceremonies (Harrell, 2001; Wechsler Segal, 1986). Both Harrell (2001) and Durand (1995) found that Army officer spouses often feel pressure to fulfill these traditional military spouse roles out of fear that if they do not, it could reflect poorly on their service member. This is irrespective of Directive 1400.33, which prohibits the military from considering a spouses' education, employment, or participation in military functions when making decisions about a service member's career (United States Department of Defense, 1988). Therefore, a military spouse's ability to pursue employment or advance their education is likely to be negatively affected by the pressure to fulfill these demanding spouse roles. Additionally, military spouses are often considered non-traditional students due to their increased age and their parental roles. Interestingly, non-traditional students tend to have an increased association with the non-collegiate environment and this association correlates to increased attrition rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For military spouse students, their interactions with the non-collegiate environment include the military community that they belong to and these interactions likely serve as barriers to their educational attainment.

The military lifestyle itself can be very demanding on military families. Wechsler Segal (1986) has described the military as a greedy institution because of multiple factors, such as the high-risk nature of a military career, frequent relocations, and extended family separations due to deployment or military training. Maury and Stone (2014) revealed that a service member is deployed for an average of 24 months. Deployments along with temporary duty elsewhere have

been reported barriers to military spouses obtaining employment because of the constraints of fulfilling employment and family obligations without the support of their spouse (Harrell et al., 2004). One study found that spouses reported the military lifestyle to be a barrier to their educational progression during deployment and non-deployment cycles. However, the greatest barrier to advancing the education of spouses in deployment cycles was responsibilities at home (Hayes, 2011). Lack of childcare was also denoted as a large barrier during service member absences (Harrell et al., 2004).

Military families are also required to relocate frequently. As discussed by Wechsler Segal (1986), 43% of enlisted families and 69% of officer families reported having to move a minimum of three times. The frequencies of relocations increase with the years in service. A more recent report revealed that 56.9% of spouses had moved across state lines or abroad 1-2 times in the past five years (Maury & Stone, 2014). Interestingly, a National Military Family Association (2007) study found that 25% of spouses reported frequent moves or service member deployments being reasons for delaying their education. Frequent relocations prohibited 7% of spouses from finishing their education and 2% of spouses reported that they had to switch schools due to relocation. Further, 1% of military spouses had to retake courses because of relocation.

Supporting Military Spouse Students

It is reported that 76% of military spouses interested in furthering their education state that the cost of education itself prohibits them from enrolling in an educational or training program (United States Department of Defense, 2009). To address this issue, the DoD has implemented programming to support military spouse students. This programming includes allowing service members to transfer post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to dependents (U.S. Department

of Veterans Affairs, n.d.) and the MyCAA program. The MyCAA program provides tuition assistance to rank-eligible spouses (E-1 to E-5, W-1 to W-2, and O-1 to O-2) who are pursuing associate's degrees, certification, or licensure (Military.com, n.d.). There are also numerous examples of scholarships available to military spouses to help support their education. One example is the Joanne Holbrook Patton Military Spouse Scholarship, which was created by the National Military Family Association in 2004 (National Military Family Association, 2007).

The DoD has also created the Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO) program. The SECO program provides dedicated career counselors and a variety of educational and employment resources to military spouses (Military OneSource, n.d.). Given the demands of the military lifestyle, the following careers have been recommended to spouses: education, healthcare, financial services, information technology, real estate, and vocational or technical fields (United States Department of Defense, 2009). These career paths are likely promoted to spouses who use the SECO Program services given their portability and conduciveness to a military lifestyle. Non-DoD organizations, such as In Gear Career (In Gear Career: Serving Career-Minded Military Spouses, n.d.) and the National Military Spouse Network (National Military Spouse Network, n.d.), have been created to support military spouses wanting to pursue a career. These organizations provide networking opportunities, mentoring, and resources for military spouse professionals.

Other recommendations for helping military spouses obtain their educational and career goals include providing affordable and accessible childcare, creating flexible admissions policies, providing resources specific to military spouses on college campuses, building partnerships with employers to promote the hiring of military spouses, and addressing the licensing and certification challenges that many military spouses face (Gleiman, 2013; Gleiman

& Swearingen, 2012; Harrell et al., 2004; National Military Family Association, 2007).

Childcare is an example of a military spouse barrier that has been addressed. Programs such as Childcare Aware provide subsidized childcare to military families (Childcare Aware, n.d.).

Further, the Joining Forces Initiative recently announced that all 50 states have agreed to streamline the licensing and credentialing of military spouses (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016), allowing military spouses to maintain a career with frequent relocations.

Research Questions

The purpose of this exploratory study was to better understand the educational and career desires and influences of military spouses currently enrolled in an educational program. Two specific questions were asked in this study. First, we asked what career fields, educational degrees, and academic majors are being pursued and/or are desired by current military spouse students. This question was asked given reports of military spouses placing a high emphasis on their education and career progression (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007; Harrell et al., 2004; Maury & Stone, 2014). This question was also asked due to the DoD recommendations of specific portable career fields for military spouses (United States Department of Defense, 2009). Our second question evaluated which factors (military lifestyle, genuine interest in the field, ease in finding employment, or family demands) influenced military spouses to pursue their intended career and academic major. We asked this question because the military lifestyle has been reported a barrier to spouse educational and career success (Hayes, 2011; Maury & Stone, 2014; National Military Family Association, 2007). Therefore, we were interested in determining if the military lifestyle or other factors influenced military spouse students' career and major selection.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

An exploratory 29-item online survey instrument (Appendix) was developed and implemented using Qualtrics to provide an initial characterization of military spouse educational and career goals and influences. The survey instrument was comprised of single-item measures and was not from standardized scales or assessments. Instead the instrument was developed based on the authors' assessment on the gaps within the military spouse educational literature and was designed as formative research to collect descriptive statistics in an attempt to find general trends, attitudes, and beliefs. Specifically, the survey asked current military spouse students demographic questions as well as questions about their intended career, educational degree program and academic major, and what influenced them to pursue their educational and career goals. Respondents qualified for the study by meeting three inclusion criteria: respondent was a military spouse, not currently a service member, and enrolled in an educational program.

Survey participants were recruited to participate via two avenues. First, Army brigade- and battalion-level commanders were contacted to ask permission to distribute the survey via Family Readiness Group channels. If permission was granted, a designated representative from the unit distributed the survey to respondents via email on behalf of the investigators. The survey was distributed to 32 Army brigade- or battalion-level units from August 2014 to February 2015. Further, in February 2015, the primary investigator wrote a blog piece for the online magazine "NextGen MilSpouse" asking for military spouse participation in the survey (Ott, 2015). Participants provided electronic consent, were allowed to skip any question that they did not wish to answer, and the study was approved by the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The survey was open from August 2014 to April 2015. In total, 358 respondents accessed the survey, with 150 respondents qualifying based on the criteria described above. Three of the 150 qualified respondents were excluded from analyses due to duplicate entries or survey testing. Therefore, the qualified respondents for this study totaled 147 individuals.

Measures

Demographic characteristics were obtained, including age (measured continuously in years), sex (male or female), race (White, European-American, Caucasian; Black or African American; Asian/Pacific Islander, Asian-American; Native American, American Indian, Aleut; Other), and ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino or Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino). Participants also reported the number of children under the age of 18 that were living in their household and their spouse's rank. Due to the small number of participants who identified as minority races, race was dichotomized as White and All Other Races for our analyses. In addition, spouse's rank was categorized as E-1 through E-3 (junior enlisted), E-4 through E-6 (mid-enlisted; non-commissioned officer), E-7 through E-9 (senior-enlisted; senior non-commissioned officer), O-1 through O3 and W1 through W3 (junior officer; company grade), and O-4 through O-6 (mid-officer; field grade).

Factors influencing educational decision-making were assessed using a Likert-type scale. For example, participants were asked to report how several factors (i.e., fits with military lifestyle, genuine interest, ease with finding a job, fits with family demands) influenced the decision to pursue their current career goals and academic major. Response options ranged from 1 = no influence to 5 = highly influenced.

Analytic Strategy

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 22 and Microsoft Excel Version 14. To answer our first research question, descriptive statistics were run to describe the sample and to identify the career paths, academic majors, and educational degrees being pursued. Estimation of average levels of influence factors on educational decision-making using a Likert-type scale was performed to address our second research question. Bivariate correlations were analyzed to assess collinearity and analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were utilized to determine if variables of interest (e.g., career influence) were related to categorical variables (e.g., race). Data presented is representative of the number of respondents who answered each question, with respondents being allowed to not respond to specific questions if desired (as requested by the IRB).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Respondents were primarily female ($n = 145$, 99.3%), in the 25-29 years of age group, and identified as White, European-American, or Caucasian and non-Hispanic or non-Latino (Table 1). Most respondents were married to mid-enlisted (E-4 to E-6) service members who were in the Army (Table 1). Fort Bragg ($n = 26$, 19.3%), Fort Campbell ($n = 36$, 26.7%), and Fort Drum ($n = 13$, 9.6%) were the most commonly reported duty stations at the time of this study.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables

Variable	Number	%
Age		
19 or less	2	1.6
20-24	22	17.9
25-29	44	35.8
30-34	22	17.9
35-39	23	18.7
40 or greater	10	8.1
Race		
White, European-American, Caucasian	121	83.4
Black or African American	11	7.6
Asian/Pacific Islander, Asian American	3	2.1
Other	10	6.9
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	20	14.5
Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino	118	85.5
Number of children under 18		
0	56	40.0
1-2	64	45.7
3 or greater	20	14.3
Service member rank		
Junior enlisted (E-1 to E-3)	4	3.1
Mid-enlisted (E-4 to E-6)	71	54.1
Senior enlisted (E7 to E-9)	24	18.3
Junior officer (O-1 to O-3; W-1 to W-3)	26	19.9
Mid-officer (O-4 to O-6)	6	4.6
Service branch		
Army	122	83
Navy	5	3.4
Air Force	13	8.8
Marines	4	2.7
Coast Guard	2	1.4
Army National Guard	1	0.7

Most respondents ($n = 102$, 69.4%) were enrolled in an educational program full-time; 45 (30.6%) respondents were enrolled part-time. The highest level of education that the majority of participants had completed at the time of the study was high school or general education development (GED), bachelor’s degree, and associate’s degree (Table 2).

Table 2.

Highest Level of Education Completed at the Time of the Study

Educational Level	Number	%
Did not complete high school	1	0.7
High school or General Educational Development (GED)	50	32.7
Vocational certificate and/or training	11	7.5
Associate’s degree (A.S. or A.A.)	23	15.6
Bachelor’s degree (B.S. or B.A.)	43	29.3
Master’s degree (e.g., M.S. or M.A.)	15	10.2
Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D. or Ed.D.)	2	1.4
Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S)	1	0.7
Professional Degree (e.g. J.D., P.A.)	1	0.7

Career Fields, Educational Degrees, and Academic Majors

One hundred twenty-five respondents answered the question asking about their desired career goals. The respondents’ top four desired career fields were in the following categories: medical field ($n = 41$, 32.8%), business ($n = 22$, 17.6%), mental health and behavioral science ($n = 21$, 16.8%), and education ($n = 17$, 13.6%). Within the medical field, nursing ($n = 17$, 13.6%) and allied health ($n = 11$, 8.8%) careers were the most reported. General business, accounting, and management were equally reported within the business field, with 4.8% ($n = 6$) of total respondents each. Within the education field, 8.0% ($n = 10$) of total respondents wanted to pursue careers in K-12 education and 5.6% ($n = 7$) wanted to pursue careers in higher education.

Mental health was the top specific career field reported with 14.4% ($n = 18$) of total respondents. The overwhelming majority ($n = 127$, 94.8%) of respondents were taking courses towards their intended career field at the time of this study. Seven spouses (5.2%) were not taking courses towards their intended career field.

When asked about the educational degree that they were currently pursuing, the majority of the respondents were working towards an associate's degree, bachelor's degree, or master's degree (Table 3). Five (3.8%) respondents were not currently working towards degrees; these respondents were working on postgraduate certificates ($n = 2$, 1.5%), classes to help graduate school application ($n = 1$, 0.8%), classes for current career ($n = 1$, 0.8%), or did not disclose a reason ($n = 1$, 0.8%). When asked when they began working on their current degree, 66 (52.7%) responded one year or less. Forty-nine (38.8%) had been working on their educational program for 2-4 years and 11 (8.7%) responded 5 years or more.

Table 3

Educational Degrees Military Spouse Respondents Are Currently Working Towards

Degree	Number	%
I am not working towards a degree	5	3.8
Vocational certificate and/or training	7	5.4
Associate's degree (A.S. or A.A.)	23	17.7
Bachelor's degree (B.S. or B.A.)	48	36.9
Master's degree (e.g., M.S. or M.A.)	34	26.2
Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D. or Ed.D.)	4	3.1
Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S)	3	2.3
Professional Degree (e.g. J.D., P.A.)	6	4.6

The majority of respondents listed a master’s degree when asked what about the highest degree or certificate level they envisioned needing to achieve their career goals (Table 4). Doctoral degree and bachelor’s degree were the second and third most common responses, respectively.

Table 4.

Highest Degree Military Spouses Envision Needing to Obtain Career Goals

Degree	Number	%
I will not have to complete any further education	3	2.3
Vocational certificate and/or training	4	3.1
Associate’s degree (A.S. or A.A.)	4	3.1
Bachelor’s degree (B.S. or B.A.)	21	16.3
Master’s degree (e.g., M.S. or M.A.)	47	36.4
Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D. or Ed.D.)	29	22.5
Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S)	8	6.2
Professional Degree (e.g. J.D., P.A.)	11	8.5
Professional certification or licensure	2	1.6

One hundred twenty-two participants responded to the question about their current academic majors. Health-related majors ($n = 35, 28.7\%$) were the most popular academic majors amongst the respondents, with nursing ($n = 13, 10.7\%$) being the most reported major. Business majors ($n = 23, 18.9\%$) were the second most cited, and accounting or MBA ($n = 6$ or 4.9% each) were the most frequently reported business majors. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors were third most popular ($n = 20, 16.4\%$) and psychology ($n = 6, 4.9\%$) and biology ($n = 5, 4.1\%$) were the most reported STEM majors. Social science was the fourth most popular major ($n = 16, 13.1\%$), with social work ($n = 7, 5.7\%$) being the most frequently reported. Finally, education ($n = 11, 9.0\%$) and humanities ($n = 8, 6.7\%$) were the fifth and sixth most popular majors, respectively.

Career and Academic Major Influences

When asked which factors influenced their career selection, respondents denoted that genuine interest was the top influence for their selected career choice (Table 5). Military lifestyle was listed as the lowest influence based on influence scale means. Financial reasons (8 of 20 or 40% of respondents who answered this question) were the most commonly cited “other” factor that influenced respondent’s career goals.

Table 5.

Factors Influencing Military Spouse Career Selections

Factor	Number	Mean	SD
Fits with military lifestyle	131	3.11	1.64
Genuine interest in the field	131	4.66	0.72
Ease of finding a job	131	3.61	1.30
Fits with family demands	131	3.55	1.40

A Pearson’s r correlation coefficient analysis was performed to determine the relationship between spouse’s rank and career influences. A statistically significant negative correlation was observed between spouse’s rank and fitting with family demands ($r = -0.23, p = 0.009$). This suggests that fitting with family demands was a greater influence for participants whose spouses were lower ranking than those who were higher ranking. All other correlations between spouse’s rank and career influences were nonsignificant. ANOVAs were then used to determine the relationship between race and career influence. A statistically significant difference of means was found between race and genuine interest in a career field ($F[1] = 5.36, p = .022$). These results suggest that White, European-American, or Caucasian military spouses were more likely to choose their career field based on genuine interest than all other racial identities.

The majority of respondents stated that they would pursue their chosen career path if not affiliated with the military ($n = 103, 79.2\%$). Of those who would select a different career path, 13 of 26 (50%) stated that they would pursue careers in the science and health fields, with interest in the field listed as the top reason.

When asked about the factors that influenced their academic major selection, respondents again listed genuine interest as the top reason (Table 6). Fitting with the military lifestyle was listed as the lowest influence.

Table 6.

Factors Influencing Military Spouse Major Selections

Factor	Number	Mean	SD
Fits with military lifestyle	125	3.04	1.69
Genuine interest in the field	124	4.60	0.80
Ease of finding a job	125	3.78	1.22
A convenient program was offered	125	3.62	1.47
Fits with family demands	[??]	3.37	1.48

All correlations between spouse’s rank and major influences were nonsignificant. ANOVAs were then used to determine the relationship between race and academic major influence. A statistically significant difference of means was found between race and genuine interest in a major ($F[1] = 4.56, p = .035$). These results suggest that genuine interest in the field was a greater influence for White, Caucasian, and European-American spouses than for minority spouses. This is consistent with our career influence findings.

Discussion

The overall goal of this exploratory study was to investigate the career and educational goals and influences of current military spouse students. Our respondent pool resembles previous reports of the military spouse community (Harrell et al., 2004; Maury & Stone, 2014;

National Military Family Association, 2007). The sample was primarily Army, which is likely due to the recruiting strategies. Also reflecting the military community, the majority of participants were married to enlisted service members, with E-4 to E-6 being the most common ranks (United States Department of Defense, 2013).

Our results demonstrate that the medical, business, mental health and behavioral science, and educational fields are the top careers that current military spouse students' desire. Interestingly, these fields are all portable career fields that military spouses have been recommended to pursue by the DoD (United States Department of Defense, 2009). Our data also reveal that current military spouses are pursuing academic majors to enter these fields and working on their current degrees for four years or less.

Military Spouses Desire Advanced Degrees

At the time of this study, the majority of respondents were classified as non-traditional students based on age (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and 85.8% of respondents had completed a bachelor's degree or lower. Prior research demonstrates that military spouses place a high emphasis on education (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2007; Harrell et al., 2004). Our data support this with 73.1% of respondents working towards a bachelor's degree or higher at the time of this study. Further, 73.7% of respondents stated that they envisioned needing a graduate or professional degree to obtain their desired career goal. Educational assortative mating (Mare, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005) explains our findings given that the military places a strong emphasis on the education and training of its service members. At the time of enlistment, service members perform well on the standardized Armed Forces Qualifying Test and have higher rates of high school graduation compared to the civilian sector (Clever & Segal, 2013; Watkins & Sherck, 2008). The military is also an avenue for many enlisted service members to obtain an

education and there are numerous educational benefits available to them (United States Congress, 2004).

Influences Affecting Military Spouse Career Selection

Our data also demonstrate that military spouses select their intended career and academic major based on genuine interest. This is supported by our observation that the majority of military spouses would pursue their intended career field if not associated with the military. Interestingly, the military lifestyle had the least influence on military spouse career and academic major selection. The military has been described as a “greedy institution” and demanding of both service members and military families, to include spouses (Harrell, 2001; Wechsler Segal, 1986). We were surprised that the military lifestyle was not a greater influence on military spouse career and academic major selection given reports of deployments and frequent relocations being hindrances to military spouse career and educational advancement (Harrell et al., 2004; Hayes, 2011; National Military Family Association, 2007). Our data therefore implies that military spouses are pursuing degrees based on personal interest, possibly with the intent to create a meaningful identity independent of the military.

Our data also demonstrated that when selecting careers, enlisted spouses place a higher emphasis on fitting with family demands than officer spouses. There are two likely explanations for this observation, both of which need to be investigated further. The first is that enlisted spouses tend to be younger than officer spouses and have younger families to raise and support. Therefore, enlisted spouses may be seeking flexible careers that allow them to tend to the needs of their families while pursuing professional goals in the context of the military lifestyle. An alternative explanation could be that officer spouses likely complete their bachelor’s degree prior to marrying given that officers are required to complete a bachelor’s degree to commission.

Therefore, officer spouses could be more established in their careers and also or alternately working towards a graduate degree before starting a family.

Our data also revealed that non-minority spouses were more likely than minority spouses to select their career and academic major based on genuine interest. A meta-analysis revealed that while race or ethnicity does not affect the career aspirations of an individual, different racial or ethnic groups perceive career opportunities and barriers differently (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005). Our findings could imply that minority spouses may perceive the unique barriers imposed by the military lifestyle differently than non-minority spouses. This could cause minority spouses to select a career or educational major based on other influences, such as cultural acceptance. According to our analysis, minority spouses were not more likely to select a career or major based on the military lifestyle or fitting with family demands. Hence, further investigation is needed to understand the factors that may influence the career and academic major selection of minority military spouses.

Implications and Future Research

Numerous military spouses report that the financial burden associated with attending college prohibit them from advancing their education (United States Department of Defense, 2009). To help alleviate this burden, the DoD has created the MyCAA program, which provides rank eligible spouses with tuition assistance to obtain an associate's degree or pay licensure or certification fees (Military.com, n.d.). However, spouses wanting to pursue a bachelor's degree or higher, which include the majority of spouses in this study, do not qualify for the MyCAA program. This highlights the need to develop government-supported programming specifically geared towards spouses who want to pursue advanced degrees.

Furthermore, institutions of higher education can develop programming to support

military spouse students. As discussed by Gleiman (2013), faculty, advisors, and administrators at institutions of higher education can support military spouse students by familiarizing themselves with the military culture and the unique challenges that military spouses face. This will help to decrease both personal and institutional barriers that may impede military spouse student success. Solutions to these barriers include flexible admissions policies, counseling and mental health support, child care and financial aid resources, accelerated and adaptable academic programs, increased educational accessibility, and adopting the policies of the Service Members Opportunity Colleges, a network of institutions that agree to transfer credits for military-connected students (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Harrell et al., 2004; National Military Family Association, 2007, United States Congress, 2004).

Based on these exploratory findings, numerous research questions still exist. First, given that the majority of the spouses in our study were Army, determining if spouses from other service branches have the same educational and career interests and influences is of importance. Similarly, with two minor exceptions, the factors that influenced the career and educational major selection within specific military spouse populations did not differ. Therefore, further investigating the factors that influence the educational and career goals of explicit military spouse populations (e.g., enlisted versus officer spouses) would be important to determine the specific needs and desires of the military spouse community. It is also important to evaluate how the barriers faced by military spouse students at all educational levels affect the retention of service members in the military. This would potentially provide insight into new programming or policies that could be adopted to support military spouse students and decrease service member attrition. Along the same lines, investigating the military spouse student awareness and perceived effectiveness of the various programs available to assist in their educational and career

advancement is of importance to evaluate the success of programming developed by the DoD, institutions of higher education, and other private organizations. Finally, understanding the specific educational needs of military spouses (e.g., institutional characteristics and preferred learning environments) will provide both the DoD and institutions of higher learning insight as to how best to support military spouse students.

Conclusion

Overall, our data demonstrate that military spouse career goals mirror recommendations from the DoD (United States Department of Defense, 2009) and involve attainment of advanced graduate degrees. Further, our data show that genuine interest is the greatest influence in military spouse career and academic major selection. These data highlight the need to further support military spouses in their educational and career endeavors through the development of policy and programming at both governmental and institutional levels. Given that retention of high caliber service members is dependent on the quality of life of military families (United States Department of Defense, 2004), supporting military spouse students is important to the overall readiness of our military.

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Appendix

PART 1: Demographics

In this section we are interested in learning demographic information about you and your family.

1. Are you currently in the Armed Forces?
 - a. Yes [end survey]
 - b. No
2. Are you married to a military service member?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No [end survey]
3. In which branch of the military does your spouse serve on active duty?
 - a. Army
 - b. Navy
 - c. Air Force
 - d. Marines
 - e. Coast Guard
 - f. Army National Guard
 - g. Army Reserves
 - h. Navy Reserves
 - i. Air Force Reserves
 - j. Marine Reserves
 - k. Coast Guard Reserves
 - l. Air National Guard
 - m. Other (SPECIFY)
4. Are you currently enrolled in an educational program (e.g., degree or certificate programs)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No [end survey]
5. Which of the following best describes your current educational status?
 - a. I am currently enrolled as a full-time student
 - b. I am currently enrolled as a part-time student
 - c. I am not currently enrolled in an educational program [end survey]
6. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
 - a. Did not complete high school
 - b. High school or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency
 - c. Vocational certificate and/or training
 - d. Associate's degree (A.S. or A.A.)
 - e. Bachelor's degree (B.S. or B.A.)
 - f. Master's degree (e.g., M.S. or M.A.)
 - g. Doctoral degree (e.g. Ph.D., Ed.D.)
 - h. Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S.)
 - i. Professional degree (e.g. J.D., P.A.)
 - j. Other (please specify)

7. What year were you born? (yyyy)
8. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
9. With which of the following races do you *most* identify?
 - a. White, European-American, Caucasian
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Asian / Pacific Islander, Asian-American
 - d. Native American, American Indian, Aleut
 - e. Other
10. With which ethnicity do you *most* identify?
 - a. Hispanic / Latino
 - b. Non-Hispanic / Non-Latino
11. How many children under the age of 18 do you have living in your household?
12. What is your spouse's rank?
 - a. E-1
 - b. E-2
 - c. E-3
 - d. E-4
 - e. E-5
 - f. E-6
 - g. E-7
 - h. E-8
 - i. E-9
 - j. W-1
 - k. W-2
 - l. W-3
 - m. W-4
 - n. W-5
 - o. O-1
 - p. O-2
 - q. O-3
 - r. O-4
 - s. O-5
 - t. O-6
 - u. O-7
 - v. O-8
 - w. O-9
 - x. O-10
13. What military installation is your spouse currently stationed at?
14. In what state do you hold legal residency?
15. What year were you and your spouse legally married? (yyyy)
16. How many years has your spouse been active duty?

PART 2: Careers, Degrees and Majors

In this section we are interested in the careers that you are working to obtain and why you are choosing these career paths. We are also interested in learning about the degrees or certificates as well as academic majors or programs that you are pursuing to reach your career goals.

17. What are your career goals? (Please be specific)
18. Are you currently taking courses toward the career goals listed in the question above?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
19. In the items below, we are interested in the factors that influenced your decision to pursue your **current career goals**.

	Please rank the level by which the following factors influenced your current career goals on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being no influence and 5 being highly influenced.				
Fits with the military lifestyle	1 – no influence	2	3	4	5 – highly influenced
Genuine Interest					
Ease with finding a job					
Fits with family demands					
Other (please specify)					

20. If I were not affiliated with the military, I would have chosen this career.
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
21. If you were not affiliated with the military, would you choose a different career?
 - a. Yes [question 22]
 - b. No [question 24]
22. If you would choose a different career if not affiliated with the military, what career would you choose?
23. What would be the top reason for choosing an alternative career path if you were not associated with the military?
 - a. Genuine interest
 - b. Ease in finding a job
 - c. Fits with family demands
 - d. Other (please specify)
24. What degree are you currently working towards?
 - a. I am not working towards a degree
 - b. High school or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency
 - c. Vocational certificate and/or training
 - d. Associate’s degree (A.S. or A.A.)

- e. Bachelor’s degree (B.S. or B.A.)
 - f. Master’s degree (e.g., M.S., M.A.)
 - g. Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.)
 - h. Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S.)
 - i. Professional degree (e.g. J.D. or P.A.)
 - j. Other (please specify)
25. When did you start this degree or certificate program? (mm/yyyy)
26. When do you anticipate finishing your degree or certificate program? (mm/yyyy)
27. What is the highest degree or certificate level that you envision needing to obtain your career goals?
- a. I will not have to complete any further degrees or certificates
 - b. High school or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency
 - c. Vocational certificate and/or training
 - d. Associate’s degree (A.S. or A.A.)
 - e. Bachelor’s degree (B.S. or B.A.)
 - f. Master’s degree (e.g., M.S., M.A.)
 - g. Doctoral degree (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.)
 - h. Medical degree (e.g., M.D., D.V.M., D.D.S.)
 - i. Professional degree (e.g., J.D., P.A.)
 - j. Other (please specify)
28. What your *current* academic major or field of study? (Please be specific)
29. In the items below, we are interested in the factors that influenced your decision to pursue your **current academic major or field of study**.

	Please rank the level by which the following factors influenced your current major or field of study on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being no influence and 5 being highly influenced.				
	1 – no influence	2	3	4	5 – highly influenced
Fits with the military lifestyle					
Genuine Interest					
Ease with finding a job					
A convenient program was offered					
Fits with family demands					
Other (please specify)					