THE LIVED PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF AIR

NATIONAL GUARD OFFICERS AT AIR UNIVERSITY: A HERMENEUTIC

PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY

by

Clayton Edward Thompson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air University. The theory guiding this research study is David Kolb's experiential learning theory because of the emphasis placed on experiences, observations, and reflections during the education programs at Air University. The central research question was, what are the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers in the resident professional military education program at Air War College? This research study utilized a phenomenological approach as the research design and focused on Air National Guard officers attending a resident professional military education program at Air University. This study utilized semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts to collect data. The analysis technique used for this research was a six-step thematic analysis process to uncover emergent themes from the interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts. The primary themes identified were: encouraged and dedicated reflection, learning through dialogue, a focus on highlighting diverse experiences, and applying learned concepts. In addition, this study identified that personal connections enhance the experience, Air War College is more than an education course, and the experience prepares senior military leaders for their next assignment. Future research should include a qualitative study focusing on professional military education programs and a quantitative study comparing and contrasting the resident programs with the correspondence programs.

Keywords: Air National Guard, continuing education, experiential learning theory, Kolb's Learning Cycle, professional military education, Air War College

Copyright Page

Dedication

I am so thankful to my family for supporting me during this process. To my wife, Erica, thank you for filling in the gaps at night and on the weekends while I was engaged with the coursework. I know that my decision to sign up for this program was not a decision that only impacted me. Your sacrifice and support during my doctoral journey allowed me to focus on my studies, and I could not have done it without you. We had to travel this journey together, and I cannot thank you enough.

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You all are my rock and I love you!

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N/A

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The United States military invests significant resources in formal education to develop a professional national security force (Paterson, 2019). Military education is divergent from military training and the purpose of military education is to expose military personnel to diverse viewpoints, critical thinking, reasoning in ambiguous scenarios, and developing partnered relationships (Mukherjee, 2018). Although distance learning courses provide tremendous benefits for Air National Guard members, the resident program offers significant advantages that help develop future national security leaders (Dumford & Miller, 2018). This study sought to highlight the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending a professional military education program at Air University. Chapter One includes the background, social and theoretical context, problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, the research questions, and definitions.

Background

The Air National Guard has transitioned its strategic posture over the past few decades; however, the opportunities to participate in resident professional military programs at Air University have remained the same. Studying at Air University provides significant advantages in developing interoperability and establishing relationships with state-partnered nations because of the required engagement and opportunities to interact with joint and partnered military personnel. Interoperability, or the ability to work together synergistically towards a common goal, is essential for the success of military operations and is an integral component of the Department of Defense's operational approach (Frazier & Hutto, 2017). Air University requires interaction with international and joint military personnel. The State Partnership Program, an Air

National Guard program, is promoted by the Air National Guard advisor at Air University and Air National Guard students are encouraged to engage with personnel from recognized partnered nations. The interactions that occur inside and outside the classroom aim to increase the synergy between the military students.

The learning environment at Air University is diverse and the experiential learning theory concepts explain the importance of engaging in a social and diverse environment to enhance learning. This study utilized these theories to frame the experiences of Air National Guard officers at Air University and understand the learning and social climate during the professional military education experience. Although the program is a military course, the mission of Air University and the intent of the curriculum is to enhance the operational understanding of the military personnel through an education program and increase interoperability by engaging with diverse system groups in a social construct.

Historical Context

Professional military education in the military is an essential component of growing and developing senior national security leaders. Each member of the Air National Guard is required to attend professional military education to progress in their career and the number of members attending professional military education makes it a significant continuing professional education program (Fullerton et al., 2020). The investment and commitment to growing and developing the organization's members emphasize the importance of the education programs.

The original design and intent of the Air National Guard were to function as a ready reserve force without the same expectation of professionalism and education as the active component. As the National Guard increased mobilization requirements and the expectation to engage in national security affairs, senior leaders in the military and government expected Air

National Guard officers to operate with the same capabilities as the active component members. Within the past two decades, the National Guard shifted its posture from a ready reserve force with a significant constraint on the amount of time the President could mobilize a member to an operational reserve with less restriction and more mobilization requirements (Lynch & Stover, 2008).

Although the posture of the Air National Guard developed over time, the ability and interest to attend resident professional military education did not adjust. The Air War College allocates less than five percent of the professional military education seats to the Air National Guard, even though the organization comprises thirty percent of the Air Force's operational capabilities (Hokanson, 2021). In 2014, a commission established by the President generated the National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force and presented it to the President and Congress that outlined the lack of Air National Guard representation at Air University as a critical deficiency of the Air Force's organizational structure (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Social Context

The national security environment is a networked construct that requires understanding interoperability and operating with diverse teams. The operational environment requires military personnel to interact and engage with joint force members and the synergy between the numerous organizations is vital (Ispas, 2009). Intercultural education provides a competitive advantage for military personnel operating in the globalized environment by enhancing interoperability and increasing efficiency (Niculesc & Obilisteanu, 2015).

In addition, the Air National Guard executes the State Partnership Program, a Department of Defense mission to build relationships and train partnered nations. The State Partnership Program was created after the Cold War because countries in the European sector required

mentorship to ensure their freedom from Soviet rule and the United States perceived the program as a tremendous opportunity to enhance the relationships with other nations (Wilde, 2014). The ability to interact in a professional environment and identify and develop shared interests is a method to increase interoperability and is a component of working directly with partnered nations.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical context of this study includes seminal studies focused on the lived experiences of commissioned members in a professional military education program. The current literature focuses on specific civilian curricula (Combe, 2021), online professional military education for enlisted personnel (Fullerton et al., 2020), and the amount of rigor in professional military education programs (Samaan, 2018). The previous studies focused on resident and non-resident courses and examined the experiences through critical theory and a narrative inquiry theoretical framework. Researchers have utilized social learning theory, constructivism, andragogy, and critical theory to investigate adults in continuing professional education.

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Problem Statement

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The problem is that the Air National Guard does not always fill the allocated seats at Air War College, resulting in a less educated officer corps than the Department of Defense intended. Continuing professional education in the civilian sector has significant research and literature; however, there is a void of literature explicitly focused on professional military education (Fullerton et al., 2020). Financial constraints challenge professional military education at the political level and it's difficult to rationalize funding resources for professional education when national security equipment and training require a significant investment (Roennfeldt et al., 2019). The lack of a financial investment translates to limited seats at Air University and

minimal participation from the entire force. The number of allocated seats severely impacts the Air National Guard because the active component is the operational component responsible for educating and equipping all service components and the active component demands a majority of the allocated spots.

The Air National Guard organization structure is another component that hinders the understanding and interest in professional military programs at the officer level. The civilian sector has the ability to hire personnel at any point in their career and bring them into the organization with unique and diverse personal experiences. In contrast, the Air Force must grow and develop its senior leaders without the ability to hire from external organizations at the senior level (Nolan & Overstreet, 2018). This organizational structure limits the amount of exposure and information each unit possesses to the previous members of the same organization. Air National Guard units without an emphasis on professional military education develop and persist in a culture that does not fill the allocated seats at Air War College.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenology was to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air War College. At this stage in the research, the professional military education experience was generally defined as the education curriculum, social interaction, and extracurricular activities at Air War College while the Air National Guard members attend the professional military education course. There was significant literature on the lived experiences of adults in education; however, the literature focused on professional military education programs in the United States is scarce. In addition to professional military education-specific programs, the available research literature sought to uncover other aspects of professional military education.

Significance of the Study

This research study contributes to the current literature and provides practical, empirical, and theoretical significance to the research topic. The practical significance describes how this study enhances Air National Guard officers' understanding of the Air War College professional military education program. The empirical significance demonstrates how this study relates to current literature or other research studies with a similar research topic. Finally, the theoretical significance describes how this research study contributes to current theoretical knowledge in the research field of study.

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of a research study extends beyond the practical applications and generates new data that aids in explaining social life in a manner that individuals can transfer to other similar situations (Tracy, 2010). Examining the lived experiences of military members attending a professional military education program in a traditional classroom setting provides data on social and collaborative interactions that occur during the program. Social interactions in an education program are crucial and provide a framework focused on collaboration and social interactions that enhance learning (Powell & Kalina, 2009). This study focused on the student's experiences and gained insight into how the students digest information, reflect on the learning, think about their new understanding, and apply the new knowledge in practical scenarios. Although recent literature has identified experiences of enlisted military members attending online courses (Fullerton et al., 2020), the current research literature did not address the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education. The information gained from this research provides a new understanding of the experiences Air National Guard members have while attending the education programs.

Empirical Significance

The social and academic integration of students participating in an educational program delivered with a resident approach increases the peer-to-peer connection and enhances the relationship and understanding of the students involved in the learning (Peters et al., 2018). Air National Guard officers overwhelmingly participate in distance learning programs instead of resident programs. Various factors contribute to the decision to engage in online learning instead of a resident program and all Air National Guard officers must place their careers in a holding pattern to attend a resident program. It is vital to understand the significance of resident education programs. In addition, Air University utilizes problem-based learning due to the requirement of military leaders to identify and implement solutions to address specific national security problems. A recent study examined problem-based learning in traditional in-person courses and distance learning courses and concluded that students in the in-person courses significantly outperformed the students participating in the online courses (Foo et al., 2021). This study sought to enhance the understanding of interpersonal interactions and problem-based learning in an in-person development program.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this study provides military officers in the Air National Guard with a greater understanding of the education and professional development that occurs at Air University and exposes the members to the benefits or challenges of participating in the resident professional military education program. The Air War College program is a ten-month professional development and education program that requires an extensive commitment from the student and significant leave from the member's professional work. Although distance learning courses are challenging for military members because they must balance their full-time

career, deployment, and family while engaging in the curriculum (Fullerton et al., 2020), many Air National Guard members do not possess an interest in attending the comprehensive resident courses. Enhancing the community's knowledge of the student's experience while attending Air War College will provide Air National Guard officers with a better understanding of the value gained from the investment made to attend the professional education program.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers in the resident professional military education program at Air War College?

Sub-Question One

How is learning influenced by observing, conceptualizing, or applying knowledge gained during the professional military education program experience at Air War College?

Sub-Question Two

How are practical activities implemented to enhance the experience at Air War College?

Definitions

The following terms were utilized in the study to communicate a specific meaning and the terms and definitions are listed below.

1. *Professional Military Education* – A continuing professional education program specific to the military and mandatory for career progression at specific levels of employment (Fullerton et al., 2020). Professional military education occurs at different stages in a military individual's career; however, all professional military education occurs after the members have attended a technical training course. All military personnel are required to attend an in-person technical training program that is an education program focused on each individual's specific field of study. In addition, all military personnel are required to

participate in computer-based training each year and most officers are highly encouraged to engage in professional development programs throughout their careers. Professional military education programs are required for career progression and occur after the officer has been in the military for years.

2. *State Partnership Program* – A Department of Defense program designed to build relationships with partnered nations, increase the partnered nations' effectiveness, and enhance interoperability (Wilde, 2014). The State Partnership Program is a Theatre Security Program that matches specific states in the United States with particular countries around the world with a mission to enhance civil-military relationships and strengthen the United States' relationship with foreign nations (Jansen, 2010). The Department of Defense assigned the program to the National Guard and each state's Air and Army National Guard organizations work with the matched partnered nation to grow and develop the relationship.

Summary

The Air National Guard lacks an understanding of and interest in participating in professional military programs at Air University. The purpose of the study was to highlight the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air University. Professional military education is essential to developing future leaders in the United States' military and enhancing the interoperability of America's armed forces. David Kolb's experiential learning theory is a popular educational theory that helps to understand how individuals learn and informs this study to provide context for the problem. The demand for the Air National Guard to participate in domestic and foreign affairs has increased over the last few decades and the nation's national security relies on a well-trained and educated National Guard

force. Members of the Air National Guard must understand the challenges or benefits of

attending professional military education at Air University and communicate the experience of

attending the resident programs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A literature review provides a contextual framework for the research study and this literature review sought to examine concepts relating to the phenomenon of lived experiences of Air National Guard students in a professional military program at Air University. This chapter introduces and analyzes the contemporary literature for the theoretical framework associated with the topic and the concept of professional military education. This chapter begins with a description of David Kolb's experiential learning theory and describes the significance of experiential learning with adult learners. The topic of professional military students or experiences at Air War College was underrepresented in current literature, and there was limited research targeting the specific topic. Based on the limited amount of information related to the topic, a creative approach to form a comprehensive understanding of the topic was the approach of this literature review.

The three primary focuses identified that relate to this topic and formed the complete description of the research study are adult learning, professional development and continuing education in the civilian sector, and professional development and continuing education in the military. Adult learning encompasses literature on andragogy, readiness and orientation, experience and motivation, active learning, and collaboration in learning. The civilian professional development and continuing education section focus on adult professional development, continuing education, globalization and education, a multicultural worldview, and cultural relations in the classroom. Finally, professional development and continuing education in the military focus on force development in the military, the significance of military education, professional military education, Air Force officer development, and debriefing in operations.

Although this paper discusses the concept of adult learning theory as a component of learning in professional military education, the experiential learning theory is the primary theoretical framework utilized to examine the area of study. This chapter concludes with a description of the gap in the literature and the objective to enhance the current literature with this study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is an essential component of a research study because it utilizes a tested theory to frame the research question and provides a perspective to analyze the phenomenon under examination (Cai et al., 2019; Kivunja, 2018; Wald & Daniel, 2020). The theoretical framework is significant because it informs the research angle and serves as a structural guide for the research study. This study applied a well-known theory to situate the research question and analysis. David Kolb's experiential learning theory is the primary theory utilized for this study and informs aspects of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education courses at Air University. This section examined the unique educational experience of Air National Guard members attending Air War College through the lens of David Kolb's experiential learning theory.

Theory of Experiential Learning

David Kolb leveraged the works of multiple theorists to develop his theory of learning and Kolb's experiential learning theory is the primary theoretical framework that underpins this qualitative study. Scholars recognize David Kolb as the architect of the experiential learning theory (Gunes, 2018), and Kolb defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). Kolb describes numerous education theorists that informed the experiential learning theory; however, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget significantly influenced Kolb's theory's development. Kolb identified

components of previous intellectuals and developed a theory highlighting various aspects of accepted theories in the past. The learners' experience is the center of focus and driver of the learning process. Experiential learning, as it relates to the experiential learning theory, is a learning process in which the learner gains understanding through reflective practices and associations with practical experiences (Chiang et al., 2021; Chiu, 2019; Schott & Marshall, 2018). Experiential learning is not a one-dimensional approach to the learning process; instead, it is a concept that encourages deep learning by introducing a learning cycle that incorporates various learning processes (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Kolb created the Experiential Learning Cycle to convey the interactions between critical areas in the learning process. The model highlights the tensions between two significant components. First, it addresses the tension between action and reflection in learning. Second, it concentrates on the friction between experiences and conceptions in learning (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's experiential learning cycle identifies the following four stages in the learning process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Enser, 2021; Gencel et al., 2021; & Chiu, 2019).

Kolb developed the following six propositions of experiential learning in 1984 when he formed the experiential learning theory: 1) learning should focus on the process and not the outcomes; 2) the process of learning is grounded in experiences and never-ending; 3) tension and conflict between opposing dialectics are necessary for learning; 4) learning should be viewed as a holistic process of acclimating to the environment; 5) learning occurs through the transactional relationship between the learner and their surroundings and; 6) learning should be recognized as the process of generating knowledge (Franco, 2019). The six propositions describe the focus educators must have to effectively instruct and influence their learners. It is essential to

recognize the components of these propositions and understand how professionals develop curricula to address these components.

The core principles outlined by Kolb served as a framework to view this study and position the related literature. The primary themes consisted of learning is grounded in experiences, opposing thoughts and discussions are beneficial to learning, learning occurs through observing and conceptualizing the environment surrounding the learner, and learning is the process of gaining knowledge through various mediums. These four components are highlighted in the following section and aim to provide context and awareness of the research topic.

Related Literature

The related literature section aimed to identify previous studies and research that related to the theoretical framework and research topic under examination. The primary theoretical framework discussed in the previous section was applied and integrated with the related literature discussion to provide additional context to the theory, previous literature, and the current topic under examination. The principal areas of the literature examined in this section focused on adult learning, professional development and continuing education, and military professional development and education.

Adult Learning

The concept of adult learning was the primary theme identified in the literature review and highlighted in this section. Under the broad notion of adult learning, the sub-themes of experience and motivation of learning, readiness and orientation to learning, active learning, and collaboration in learning were all uncovered in this section. According to Charungkaittikul and Henschke (2018), andragogy, or adult learning theory, is the most all-encompassing theory

focused on adult learners. Malcolm Knowles is the theorist credited with defining andragogy and describing the characteristics of adult learners (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018; Harrop et al., 2018; Skiba, 2020). Andragogy was vital to understanding military students in a resident professional military education program because the programs consist of military leaders in senior leadership positions. Senior development education programs consist of service members with experience operating as military professionals for at least sixteen years.

Although the theory of adult learning was not the primary theoretical framework that underpinned this qualitative study, the related literature related to many aspects of this study. The participants in this study were Air National Guard officers attending professional military education programs at Air University and they were older students with over a decade of military experience. A significant assumption of adult learners was the idea of self-concept and the understanding that adults are more self-directed in their learning than children (Matchynska & Boiko, 2020). Although the learning environment of professional military education programs might appear to be structured similarly to a typical pedagogical system, adult learning principles resonate in the curriculum, class structure, and activities implemented during the academic year at the professional military education programs. The adult learning theory is a framework that also encompasses other theoretical frameworks for learning, such as experiential learning (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018), the primary framework, and constructivism (Knowles et al., 2015).

The following six core principles describe essential components of Knowles' theory of adult learning: adult learners require an understanding of the reason they need to know the information, a self-interest to want to learn, experiences to reference during the learning process, the capability and support to learn, an understanding of the context and problem that the learning

addresses, and the intrinsic motivation to pursue new knowledge (Knowles et al., 2015). Air War College students' professional history and experience address the six core principles of Knowles' adult learning theory.

Professional military education students are at a stage in their career where they can recognize the significance of learning history, discussing military strategy, exercising military decision-making, and understanding why they needed to accomplish the curriculum. The military institution selects the students for resident education because of their excellent duty history and based on the students' recognition as the top performers in their profession. The qualified students have demonstrated a desire to learn throughout their careers and their experiences are diverse and based on their tenure of service. The students have significant experiences they can discuss and relate to the curriculum during the course. The military service department places the students in student status during the education course and school is the primary focus of the military professional, allowing them to focus all of their thoughts and energy on learning. The students have a background understanding of the military's strategic challenges and are intrinsically motivated to excel because of their core values.

A critique of the adult learning theory is that Knowles did not specifically address reflection as one of the six core principles of adult learning (Franco, 2019). In the adult learning theory construct, the self-concept principle encompasses techniques such as the flipped classroom teaching method to encourage dialogue and reflection in the learning process (Zuniga et al., 2019). A recent study of ninety-four undergraduate students demonstrated that flipped classrooms enhanced academic achievements and satisfaction with learning (Polat & Karabatak, 2022). The theory also highlighted the significance of experiences in the learning process and encourages the learning process to allow learners to reflect on past experiences while attending

the current learning event (Zuniga et al., 2019). Knowles addresses the process of reflection and the criticality of drawing on experiences as core principles in adult learning theory. However, the significance of reflecting and debriefing during the experience aspect of the learning event and the concepts of debriefing and reflecting are critical components of the primary framework, experiential learning theory.

Experiences and Motivation

A critical component of the adult learning theory and adult learners is the understanding that the learners' past presents a unique opportunity that children do not possess and that allows the learner to draw on experiences during the learning process and enhance the understanding of the information or situation (Matchynska & Boiko, 2020). According to John Dewey, dual knowledge theory emphasizes the correlation between experience and education in learning development (Kolb, 2015). This approach identifies learning that occurs during the experience of an event instead of focusing solely on the knowledge gained in the typical classroom environment. In addition, one of the pioneers of adult learning, Eduard Lindeman, stated that the learner's experiences should be the core focus of the instructional approach (Ferreira & MacLean, 2018). Although utilizing experiences to ground instruction presents a potential concern because past experiences introduce potential biases in the learning process, leveraging adult experiences amplifies and maximizes the learning experience (Ferreira & MacLean, 2018).

Although children learn from experiences, adults' lived experiences form the foundation of their learning (Matchynska & Boiko, 2020). Adult learners have particular desires related to their learning process that is connected to their social functions and drive an intrinsic learning motivation (Aljohani & Alajlan, 2020). In andragogy, motivation is a primary focus of Knowles' adult learning theory and shapes the six principles of adult learning (Cata et al., 2020). In

addition, Kolb did not establish a separate learning theory that distanced itself from behavioral or cognitive learning theories; instead, Kolb sought to integrate components of both learning theories and provide a holistic and integrative approach to learning with the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015).

The holistic approach is significant because various factors impact the learning process. The experiential learning theory is not a behavioral-centric or cognitive-centric learning theory. In behaviorism learning theory, there is no focus on the learner taking an active approach to the learning process and feedback in the form of rewards or punishment is utilized to stimulate learning through reinforced actions (Leeder, 2022). The learners' active approach in their learning process is vital to their growth. Although adult learners are extrinsically motivated by contingent rewards such as bonuses and higher salaries, adult learners' previous experiences are a factor that ignites the learners' intrinsic motivation (Franco, 2019). Contingent rewards provide short-term results; contingent rewards alone do not provide the motivation necessary to maintain enthusiasm to learn. A learning approach reliant on rewards or punishment to stimulate learning instead of intrinsic motivation through the learners' self-motivation creates challenges in sustaining motivation throughout the curriculum.

Albert Bandura identified that a learner's self-efficacy impacts the individual's motivation to learn (Rigolizzo & Zhu, 2021). Professional military education students are highly decorated and, due to the competitive nature of the selection process to attend the institution, the students must have high officer performance reports to be selected for the resident education program. Based on their performance reports, the students should have an increased sense of self-worth and positive self-efficacy. The six principles identified by Knowles emphasize the significance of self-motivated adult learners and require learners to possess self-awareness that

inspires them to enhance their current personal or professional state of being (Cata et al., 2020).

Although adult learners may communicate some extrinsic motivation, adult learners are

motivated by internal pressures the most (Aljohani & Alajlan, 2020).

Readiness and Orientation

In addition to the experiences and motivation of the adult learner, the readiness and

orientation of the learner are two more significant components of the adult learning theory. Adult

learners must be ready to engage in learning for the education experience to be effective. The

readiness of adult learners directly corresponds with the orientation of the learners' development

and learners are more ready when they can apply the learning to improved self-development

(Matchynska & Boiko, 2020). The orientation to the information pursued by an adult learner is

different from how an adolescent approaches information and it is an essential component of

andragogy because it enhances the learners' readiness to learn (Matchynska & Boiko, 2020).

Readiness, defined as an environment and preparation that establishes the capability of

commencing a learning event (Bartosiewicz et al., 2019), is vital to adult learning. The adult

learner is ready and willing to learn because the learner understands the purpose and goals of

engaging in the learning process (Matchynska & Boiko, 2020). Failing to understand the purpose

negatively impacts the readiness to learn in andragogy.

The distinction between adult learners is significantly different from adolescents. Adult

learners are typically described as financially independent, maintain a full-time job, and are over

twenty-four years old (Bengo, 2020). Although the students at Air War College are full-time

students during their school year, they are full-time professionals before attending the education

course and have been in the military for at least twelve years. Attending an education program

after serving in a professional position benefits learning because students relate their experiences

to the curriculum. Adult learners like to learn information that directly correlates with their jobs or functions in society and their readiness to consume the information increases when that understanding is recognized (Ajayi, 2019). In addition, adult learners excel when they know to orient their learning and apply solutions to current problems (Ajayi, 2019). Applying the learner's knowledge to practical solutions is considered active experimentation and is the final phase of the experimental learning cycle. The learner uses the new information gained during the previous stages of the experiential learning cycle (Chiu, 2019), and the process begins again. Recognizing the need to learn is vital to adult learning and aids in their ability to apply their past experiences and motivation to learn.

Active Learning

Although most scholars widely accept the significance of the learners' experiences, motivation, readiness, and orientation in adult learning, the importance of self-directed learning, or active learning, is more contested. Active learning begins with the learners' self-interest to enhance their current understanding and the personal desire for professional development. This is significant in andragogy because adult development improves when the learner is self-directed (Skiba, 2020). This is not to say that learning needs to be autonomous. Involving multiple perspectives through collaboration benefits learning (Du Plessis, 2020). However, the learner's desire to study and self-motivation to learn are critical components of adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015). In addition, aligning personal and professional goals with professional development encourages employees to actively pursue career development opportunities (Segarra & Gentry, 2021).

Implementing a professional development program that self-directed employees initiate is challenging because it requires the learner to possess the capability to manage their learning

(Loeng, 2020). A recent systematic review of 14 faculty development studies identified formal training as the primary method for faculty development; however, the analysis also recognized self-directed learning as the most significant component of professional development and asserted that it typically occurs in informal development programs (Phuong et al., 2020). Knowles et al. (2015) recognized self-directed learning as the most controversial adult learning principle because there is debate over the concept of adults possessing the capability to be autonomous learners. However, military officers are trained and developed before their professional military education program to be independent leaders due to the nature of their employment.

The process of active learning also includes a focus on actively reflecting on the current training and education. The concept identified in the theoretical framework section describes learning as a process of absorbing information, inferring an understanding, and applying the newly formed knowledge (Kolb &Kolb, 2007). With this perspective, learning is not a passive process; the individual is critical to the learning process in the experiential learning theory. Thus, the concept of experiential learning describes a process where learning occurs through personal perspectives and the learners' understanding and reflection of what transpired during the experience process (Saleem et al., 2021). Active reflection has demonstrated the ability to enhance adult learning and is an essential aspect of professional development programs (Koskimäki et al., 2021; Mlambo et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2021).

Knowles et al. (2015) discussed the understanding adults bring to the table when they enter a learning environment and Knowles identified that adults possess the ability to learn from reflection due to their history of knowledge and lived experiences. The cognitive engagement that occurs during the active learning and reflective process is a component of transformational

learning (Greene & Larsen, 2018). Transformational learning increases the learners' affective or cognitive learning capabilities and inspires a new perspective in the educational approach (Greene & Larsen, 2018). This process is also highlighted in Kolb's experiential learning cycle in the abstract conceptualization phase. During this phase, learners conceptualize new ideas or experiences through abstract concepts to better comprehend the unique event (Reshmad'sa & Vijayakumari, 2017). In professional military education, students possess knowledge and experiences from a tenured career in the military. The professional backgrounds of military students provide an opportunity to create dialogue and help develop depth of conversation through their reflections and storytelling.

Vygotsky suggested that reflection is a method to examine prior experiences and create new information from previous knowledge (Jacobs et al., 2020). Reflection as a tool to learn is not a passive technique. Active reflection includes analyzing the environment and communicating through dialogue a formed thought (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018; Robertson et al., 2021). Learning that focuses on cognitive functions differ from behaviorism because it challenges learners to expand their thinking beyond the initial idea. Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, is the mental process that includes reflection and introspection to enhance the learners' knowledge (Fewster-Thuente & Batteson, 2018). The introspection process is evident in the experiential learning theory and is an element of learning involved in the holistic learning concept. Kolb developed the experiential learning theory from insights gained by Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, and other educational theorists and articulated six propositions that steer the approach to experiential learning (Hayden & Osborn 2020). Kolb's integrative perspective utilizes components from various philosophies that form a singular approach to learning.

Arranging curriculum and class structures with Kolb's concepts in mind that encourage student discussion and minimize instructor input is the foundation of professional education courses.

Collaboration in Learning

Unlike the other sub-themes identified in this section, collaboration is not one of the six principles identified by Knowles in the adult learning theory; however, the idea of learning through collaboration was a concept significant to the theoretical framework and a notion critical to military education instruction. Andragogy emphasizes the significance of providing adult learners with the ability to collaborate in multiple aspects of the learning process. Knowledge-sharing through collaboration is one aspect that Knowles (2015) highlights as an essential component of adult learning. Collaboration in a professional development program increases the diversity of thought and enhances understanding by presenting new perspectives for the learners involved (Koskimäki et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2021). The resident programs integrate collaboration into the programs by developing coursework with numerous group exercises and projects during the academic year.

Learners transfer knowledge to each other during the collaborative process and impart expertise to the group (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018). The dialogue during collaborative engagements allows learners to share their knowledge and the other learners to comprehend information through practical explanations and examples. A recent study of over 500 undergraduate college students looked at Myers-Briggs Type Indicator dichotomies and the learning environment and deduced that lectures in the classroom combined with student collaboration had the highest level of agreement for a conducive learning environment across all personality preference types (Murphy et al., 2020). Obtaining new knowledge through collaboration is demonstrated in the primary theoretical framework of this study, experiential

learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2007), and the theory of constructivism (Du Plessis, 2020).
Knowledge transfer is enhanced when the learners focus on similar goals and are diverse with varying skills, knowledge, and perspectives (Black & Allen, 2018).

From a social constructivist perspective, social engagement between learners is beneficial because it allows learners with specific strengths in a subject or task to elevate the learning experience and enhance the knowledge and skills of the learners who are inexperienced or undereducated in the particular learning topic (Thuketana & Westhof, 2018). The officers attending a professional military education program are trained and experienced in various specialties, such as tactical, supportive, or administrative-type jobs. The unique dynamics in the classrooms allow individuals with education and training in specific career fields to share their knowledge and aid in constructing knowledge for military professionals without prior training or experience.

Collaborative learning from an experiential perspective also enhances the knowledge and understanding of the learners by leveraging the collaboration between learners during an experiential activity to help the learners in the group transfer knowledge based on relational topics and known information (Matriano, 2020). Collaboration and shared communication between the students and faculty are significant components of the adult learning theory (Halpern & Tucker, 2015). Allowing adult learners to develop the curriculum or assess the program through a collaborative process is another area of collaboration highlighted in andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) and it stresses active engagement from the learner to participate during the development of the program (Skiba, 2020).

Adult Professional Development

The second theme uncovered in the literature review scaled down from adult learning and focused specifically on adult learning in a professional development construct. Professional development is a process focused on improving an individual's knowledge, understanding, and skills, while the organization's objective is to enhance the group and improve the institution (Koskimäki et al., 2021). Professional development goes beyond education and education through professional development occurs in different forms. Dewey identified learning that transpired through experiential programs, such as internships and work-study programs, and claimed that learning occurs in both experiences and structured education environments (Kolb, 2015). A component of professional development is continuing professional education, described as increasing an individual's knowledge and skills for a particular profession to enhance the professional's capabilities (Nafukho et al., 2017). Institutions requiring professionals to complete continuing professional education are common in today's professional environment and can be implemented formally or informally (Curran et al., 2019). The sub-themes highlighted in this section are continuing professional education and the following three areas focused on professional development in a global environment: globalization and education, a multicultural worldview in education, and cultural relations in the classroom.

Informal continuing professional education is more self-directed, whereas formal continuing professional education is structured and typically has some oversight (Curran et al., 2019). Although there are components of informal professional development in the military, formal education and professional development are part of the military culture. Professional military education is a professional development opportunity for Air Force officers focusing on professional-specific areas such as leadership, international studies, and military strategy. It is a

structured formal program that Air Force officers must complete to progress in their profession and it is mandated and regulated by the Department of Defense.

Professional development for leaders is essential and enhances their ability to be more connected, productive, strategic, innovative, and successful at leading high-performing teams (Hires & Davis, 2021). Professional development benefits the officers and the organization, and a formal professional development program encourages officers to progress in their education and career field (Elliott, 2018). These components of leadership are critical for military officers and are required as military professionals continue in their careers. The continuing education programs designed to develop officers in the Air Force must strive to strengthen the officer's ability to connect with other professionals, innovate new strategies and tactics, lead high-performing teams, and increase the organization's effectiveness.

A recent study sought to define the development components that contribute to improving leadership and identify if the characteristic of leadership is teachable. The study examined 132 participants and revealed that professional development-type programs could increase leadership skills and professional development (Channing, 2020). Although this might appear to be common sense, it is critical to recognize that professional development programs have been scrutinized and proven effective in research studies. The military focuses significant resources and time on teaching and training military officers and the concept of leadership is a core subject executed in military professional development. Officers in the Air National Guard engage in professional development programs before their commission and are required to complete numerous development programs throughout their careers. Identifying the components in professional development programs that are effective for adult students ensures the program is effective.

Continuing Professional Education

A component of professional development is continuing professional education, described as the targeted goal to enhance the education and understanding of the professional. Continuing professional education programs have been proven effective and the programs are a process that encourages lifelong learning (Webb et al., 2019). Continuing professional education is a requirement for professional growth and continuing education programs should be non-linear and focused on long-term learning objectives (Saleem et al., 2021). Although continuing education requires employees to invest additional effort, a recent study demonstrated the self-gratification that occurs when an individual completes a continuing education program (Koskimäki et al., 2021). Employees learn new tasks and gain new knowledge during their employment; however, devoting additional time and resources to focused development enriches organizational members' self-efficacy. Providing well-received continuing education is challenging because learners have various learning preferences.

Continuing professional education programs must be designed with diverse learners in mind. There are dichotomies among the different types of learners and the four cycles of experiential learning ensure each learning type has an area that directly speaks to the learner. Individuals who associate with an assimilation learning type tend to value abstract concepts and theories more than the actual application or practical function (Huang et al., 2022). In contrast, accommodation learning types value and develop with practical or hands-on learning engagements (Huang et al., 2022). Convergent learners take abstract concepts and theories and identify practical solutions to real-world problems (Huang et al., 2022).

On the other hand, divergent learners tend to focus on observed events and generate abstract or conceptual thoughts (Huang et al., 2022). In addition, adult learning incorporates

additional variables because the learner has substantial life experiences to apply to the learning and discussion process. Regardless of the approach, the rapid onset of technological advancements and globalization increases the need for continuing professional education to ensure the professional workforce maintains proficiency in navigating the changing dynamics (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020). It is imperative that the continuing education process can occur in both formal and informal capacities while addressing the various learning types (Koskimäki et al., 2021).

Formal continuing education is an essential component of military officer development and formal education and training in the military is the most significant aspect of professional development (Paterson, 2019). Continuing education can be performed through self-directed computer-based programs online or in a resident format similar to formal education classes. Teaching continuing education online increases the risk of the education process having a limited transfer of information due to the dialogue, reflection, and collaboration techniques occurring online (Gibbons et al., 2019). Continuing professional education events that are interactive, combine various modalities, are perceived as valued by the learner, and were not short courses are more effective forms of continuing education (Drude & Hilty, 2019). Formal continuing education programs are designed to enhance a professional's understanding of problems and introduce new skills to address challenges in a changing environment (Webb et al., 2019). Continuing professional education is essential to developing military personnel who can adapt to new challenges and excel in the global security environment in the twenty-first century (Lubomir et al., 2022).

Globalization and Education

Professional development and continuing professional education for international industries must consider and educate on the modern global environment. A multicultural, diverse, and globalized society with a requirement for learning and understanding the world's interconnectedness characterizes the current climate in the twenty-first century (Achaeva et al., 2019). Scholars describe globalization as the interconnectedness of social networks worldwide and a concept that has erupted over the last century (Bauer & Avoseh, 2018). In addition to increasing the necessity and ability for corporations to exchange corporate knowledge, logistic chains, and technology (Ditta, 2020), the emergence of a globalized society has amplified the requirement to include international perspectives in education to remain competitive in the global environment (Johansen & Tkachenko, 2019). Learning from individuals from other cultures is a method to transform uninformed organizations into learning organizations (Halmaghi, 2021).

Although individuals share many common characteristics, everyone is unique in how they learn and the experiences they carry with them (Kolb, 2015). In addition, the environment is a critical aspect of the learning process because knowledge is not gained from only reading books; instead, learners must interact and engage with their environment to fully understand the information context (Kolb, 2015). Experiential learning theory emphasizes that learning occurs through interactions involving the knowledge of self and understanding of others and engaging with individuals from other cultures through experiential learning enhances intercultural development (Lambert-Snodgrass et al. 2021). As learners engage with the people and artifacts around them, they begin to understand their world more.

The philosopher Len Vygotsky referred to the ability to tap into social knowledge as the tool of culture and stated that the social knowledge gained by individuals was then passed on to

future generations (Kolb, 2015). The networked system of today's global environment means that managers in most organizations must learn to engage with numerous cultures and the unique differences between cultures. The process of experiential learning is an effective method of learning the distinctions between different cultures while enhancing a manager's ability to navigate the global environment (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). As individuals and organizations expand their understanding of different cultures, this is one of the ways globalization intersects with multiculturalism through education and interaction (Bauer & Avoseh, 2018).

Identifying methods to enhance education in a globalized world is essential because intercultural engagements are complicated and the academic environment is increasingly becoming more culturally diverse (Johansen & Tkachenko, 2019). Engaging in in-person experiences that involve cross-cultural immersion is a facet of the globalized environment and creates cross-cultural learning experiences (Pacheco, 2020). A recent research study by Jacobs et al. (2020) focused on the experiential learning theory and demonstrated that global understanding and learning increase through interacting with different cultures, generating new perspectives, and developing relationships during instruction. Although the qualitative study only examined four participants, professional and individual development, fostering relationships, and gaining an understanding through cultural interactions were the three themes identified (Jacobs et al., 2020) and support articles emphasizing the significance of relationships and experiences in experiential learning (Chiang et al., 2021; Kolb & Kolb, 2007).

Multicultural Worldview in Education

The goal of educating on the global environment is to form a worldview consistent with diverse perspectives and provide the learner with the ability to navigate the complex global construct. One of the essential purposes of a higher education institution and a principle of a

learning organization is the transfer of knowledge that promotes multiculturalism (Halmaghi, 2021). Engaging in education programs and developing relationships with partnered and allied nations decreases cultural biases and increases cultural understanding and empathy (Martinez-Machain, 2021). Jean Piaget is a constructivist educational theorist that influenced Kolb's experiential learning theory by highlighting that a learner's intelligence is a byproduct of their experiences and interactions with their environment (Kolb, 2015). Learning by performing a task, learning with concrete examples, learning by interacting with the environment, and learning through other people by engaging with other individuals are components Kolb formulated from other theorists and implemented in his experiential learning theory.

With this constructivist concept in mind, constructing a worldview through a culturally diverse classroom provides an opportunity to increase the learner's perspective. Military members often interact with individuals from different countries during missions; however, immersive educational experiences, consistent with the experiential learning theory, with multicultural personnel are beneficial for the students and have demonstrated positive student outcomes such as the recognition of power structures (Jacobs et al., 2020). The ability to construct a specific worldview consistent with the perspectives of the native cultures is critical for senior military leaders and enhanced by attaining an awareness of cultural-specific information and the capabilities possessed by the personnel in the region (Tudorachie & Ispas, 2018). A challenge for military professional development programs that incorporate a diverse student body constructed of personnel from various cultures is the program's ability to maintain academic rigor with different educational levels (Samaan, 2018). This is described by Kolb and Kolb (2007) as a challenge of the experiential learning theory because different cultures

incorporate various learning styles, and the cultural differences in learning styles make classroom integration complex.

Cultural Relations in the Classroom

Constructing a worldview in education demands integrating various cultural components in the classroom and enhancing cultural relations through knowledge transfer. Participating in an education program incorporating cultural relations and collaborative learning allows learners to form a more comprehensive worldview (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018; Robertson et al., 2021). The experiential learning theory is a holistic learning theory that highlights the benefits of leveraging cultural relations in the classroom and challenges the concept that learning is acquired only from behavioral or cognitive learning approaches (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). Kolb's theory emphasizes individual and social learning components that are significant to the learning process in multicultural scenarios. Although the individual is essential to the experiential learning theory and Kolb addresses the significance of knowing the learner and emphasizes the concept of understanding yourself, it is critical to understand other perspectives in the classroom. This is a vital aspect of the experiential learning cycle concept and establishes the idea that different learners gain new information about abstract concepts from various learners in ways unique to the individual (Gencel et al., 2021).

The emphasis on utilizing military training and education programs as a security cooperation concept to enhance relationships with partnered and allied nations increased after World War Two (Paterson, 2019). Adult learners develop shared understandings while engaging in collaborative education programs involving diverse learners (Skiba, 2020). Professional military education classrooms are diverse learning spaces and the diversity in the classroom ensures there are unique learners with diverse learning styles in each space. Professional military

education with peer engagement enhances intercultural and sociopolitical skills in military officers (Roennfeldt, 2019). The students are in the resident program for ten months and engaging with the faculty for one year, providing an opportunity for the faculty to have significant time to know and understand the learner and time for the student to introspect and learn about themselves.

Specifically, military personnel from other countries that train and learn with individuals from the United States' military develop personal relationships and like-mindedness during the training (Martinez-Machain, 2021). These specific engagements of studying with students from different cultures and countries allow individuals to construct similar competencies and strategic approaches in the global environment (Halmaghi, 2021). The new learning environment offers the opportunity for new concrete experiences in learning. The concrete experience stage describes the process when learners engage in a new experience or reflect on an old experience (Gencel et al., 2021). Although some individuals have suggested that the learning cycle can begin with any stage, most experts recognize the concrete experience stage as the first stage in the learning process (Behrendt & Machtmes, 2021). The United States' professional military education programs have increasingly incorporated allied and partnered nations in professional military education programs (Samaan, 2018) and the United States invests more money in training and developing partnered countries than any other country in the world (Paterson, 2019). The significant investment in military personnel communicates the importance of military professional development.

Military Professional Development

Military professional development is a professional development concept targeted toward military personnel. Similar to standard professional development, the intent of professional

development in the military extends beyond professional education. Force development in the military is a strategic process aimed at enhancing professionalism in the organization and military training and education is the primary method to master professionalism (Paterson, 2019). Society references the military profession as a profession of arms and an educational approach that embraces stoicism is critical in developing the members of an operational force (Stricker et al., 2017). It is evident that the United States military embodies the notion of force development because they require military members to complete professional military education programs at multiple stages of their careers. Promoting professional development alone is not adequate. Military professionals must participate in force development programs within their community that enhance their training and education in concepts specific to the profession of arms (Stricker et al., 2017).

The development of military personnel is a characteristic that includes specific educational objectives in formal and informal education that builds leaders and provides military personnel with the tools necessary to address complex problems in their various roles (Hedlund et al., 2003). Force development is more than a focus on education; it is a strategic approach to managing an individual's career, including career-broadening assignments, training courses, and promotion considerations (Brown & Bass, 2022). Military officers perform a critical role in shaping and informing foreign policy and the development of the military officer is essential for ensuring ethical and accurate military advice (Martinez-Machain, 2021). Formal education, training, and programs focused on the instruction of ethics education are two critical components in a strategic program designed to develop a professional military officer (Paterson, 2019). Strategic decision-making with an ethical foundation involves understanding and coordinating domestic and international actions to ensure national security (Samaan, 2018).

Significance of Military Education

A component of military force development is military education. Military education is a specific program aimed to broaden the professional's understanding of the military and political environment. Educating military officers is vital to the nation's national security. The Joint Chiefs of Staff create policies that direct the learning objectives for military education and emphasize developing officers with critical thinking skills and creative approaches to resolving national security concerns (Cole, 2021). The military profession is an occupation that operates in a continuously changing environment that is volatile and complex, requiring military officers to progress in order to remain vigilant and ensure national security (Tudorachie & Ispas, 2018). Military and government leaders have valued education in the military because senior leaders recognize the importance of developing military decision-makers with vital skills to think critically and operate in a complex environment (Paget, 2019). Similar to the global business sector, developing military leaders requires education that encompasses more than just practical or tactical instruction.

Military education provides a way to implement a whole of government approach to education and emphasize international relations and a democratic perspective (Mujkic et al., 2019). This shift towards a global perspective is an aspect of military education that has adjusted over the years with new military education curricula focusing on cooperation-oriented security, or joint operations, instead of only thinking about defense strategies (Lomsadze & Toliashvili, 2021). Military education, especially professional military education, is designed to develop critical thinking and inform officers how to think critically instead of instructing a curriculum with fixed beliefs (Paterson, 2019). It is essential for military officers to participate in military education programs because the developmental and educational programs inform military

members about their institution's standards and what it means to be a military officer (Fullerton et al., 2020).

In addition, to understanding the United States Air Force values, learning in a modern professional military education program ensures other perspectives are recognized. Historically, military education possessed a Western cultural perspective (Samaan, 2018); however, current programs at Air University incorporate international officers in each seminar room to provide alternate perspectives and enhance the military education experience. American students can discuss and share experiences with officers from other countries, exposing each military professional to new knowledge and a greater understanding of cultural differences.

Professional Military Education

Force development in the military consists of formal professional military education programs that seek to assess and challenge military professionals at critical stages in their professional careers. Professional military education is present across all United States military organizations and the various programs are mandatory for individuals to advance in their military careers. The primary objective of officer professional military education is to educate military officers in the area of national security (Samaan, 2018). The Air Force maintains and manages three levels of professional military education programs, including primary, intermediate, and senior development education levels, which are mandatory for promotion and career progression (Department of the Air Force, 2020). The professional military programs consist of the following overarching areas of study: instruction on critical thinking, historical and social concepts military professionals should understand, and academics that enhance the professional's warfighting capabilities (Paterson, 2019). Higher levels of professional military education center on preparing officers to take on command positions, require strategic decision-makers, understand

the political component of national security, and develop skillsets that enable the senior leader to operate in a joint and multi-national environment (Goode, 2019).

To ensure learning is grounded in experiences and instills the traits highlighted in the experiential learning theory, professional military education students should participate in classroom discussions to share their experiences and correlate their past experiences with the learning objectives discussed in the curriculum. Students in professional military education programs should receive feedback and grades on the assignments they complete; however, the institution or organization should not be focused on student outcomes as much as on the student's ability to understand the topics and discussions. The student experience in military education programs aims to demonstrate the simple concept that learning is the process of taking in information, conceptualizing the information, and applying the knowledge in a classroom that will translate to operational success. In professional military education programs, learners listen to lectures, participate in small classroom discussions focusing on the information presented in the lecture, and then apply the understanding through a practical scenario exercise.

The military educational institution enhances the learning experience through cognitive conflict, a concept introduced by Jean Piaget (Liu, 2020) and evident in the experiential learning theory concept. The classroom discussions and lectures occurring in a resident professional military education course should encourage cognitive conflict in the learning process because opposing viewpoints are commended and presented to the students. In addition to lectures and classroom discussions, a professional military education program should have a holistic approach to education. The experience should include students traveling to destinations discussed in their curriculum to experience the culture. In addition, it should involve performing tabletop exercises to practice the strategic planning process they will perform when they leave the academic

environment and engaging with a diverse set of individuals that bring a unique perspective to each discussion. This engagement with the diverse group assigned to Air War College creates a synergistic learning environment for each student.

Air Force officers serve in an organization that is multi-national and multi-industrial, requiring the officers to think critically and respond to complex environments quickly (Gleiman & Zacharakis, 2016). A curriculum that addresses critical thinking and provides discussion on decision-making under challenging situations is vital in a professional military education program. Continuing professional education in officer professional military educational programs is a continuum of learning that strives to enhance critical thinking and operational performance; however, budget constraints and other factors limit the effectiveness of the programs (Gleiman & Zacharakis, 2016). Professional military education programs continue to evolve and strive to increase critical thinking in their curriculum by adding experiential events like staff rides or a focused study of a particular historic event at the actual site of the incident (Keller & Rafuse, 2016).

In addition to educating officers on national security issues and allowing the students to learn potential solutions toward military ends, the professional military education programs provide opportunities for the officers to broaden their perspectives on social issues. The professional military education environment is a diverse setting with a curriculum that highlights unique differences in people and aims to inform the student on how those diverse perspectives impact how a member engages with society (Brown, 2020). Educational experiences in a professional military education program focusing on understanding and working with individuals from diverse backgrounds are critical to becoming a well-rounded officer.

Military personnel reside and operate in diverse communities and workplaces, and officers must inevitably have the skillset and aptitude to engage with various individuals (Ragins & Ehrhardt, 2021). Since 2013, the Air War College has been striving to incorporate diversity into the curriculum and interweave the significance of knowing others to understand how to make strategic decisions in the military (Streeter, 2013). Due to the importance placed on officer professional military education, the military invests a tremendous effort into the intentionality of developing the curriculum. Specifically, the United States Army trains its instructors on David Kolb's experiential learning theory and develops a curriculum incorporating themes from the concept (Culkin, 2018).

Air Force Officer Development

Air Force officer development highlights two distinctive components of military development and education concepts. Officers perform a unique role in the military and officer development and education vary from the enlisted programs. In addition, the Air Force serves a different mission set than the other service branches and requires a specific curriculum. Developing officers in the Air Force requires continuing education and ongoing learning for effective officer development. The Air Force identifies force development as the highest priority for Airmen in the organization. The development requirement, standards, and prioritization for Air National Guard officers are equal to their active duty counterparts and encompassed in the Air Force instruction (Department of the Air Force, 2020). Professional development in the United States military is unique from development in the private sector because the organization does not possess the ability to recruit senior leaders (Fullerton et al., 2020). Instead, the organization is dependent on growing and developing senior leaders who must be cultivated and

developed throughout their careers from an organization's professional development program

(Nolan & Overstreet, 2018).

Implementing a culture of learning and continuous improvement focused on leadership,

communication, and cultural relations is a significant strategy that the United States military

organization employs to ensure officers develop throughout their careers (Shumovetska, 2019).

Military organizations design curricula for officers at each level of their careers to ensure the

curriculum addresses the appropriate level of knowledge to match their work. Military officers

endure barriers to learning, such as deployments and operational training requirements that many

civilian employees do not encounter and the officer development programs tailored to the

military officer mitigate the potential barriers (Collins et al., 2015). Although professional

military education development in the Air Force consists of distance learning, resident, and

blended programs (Department of the Air Force, 2020), this study focuses on the resident

programs at Air University.

Debriefing in Operations

One of the unique components of officer development and education that is more Air

Force-centric is the concept of debriefing as a form of instruction. A significant component of

the experiential learning theory that relates to this research study is the application of dialogue

through debriefing to enhance learning and the benefits of dialogue in the classroom. The

resident professional military education programs can initiate the reflective learning style

because the institution designs programs to utilize dialogue in the classroom. Dialogue is an

essential component of learning and an interplay of dialogue between instructors and students in

a learning environment creates new knowledge for the learner (Perusso et al., 2020). The

professional military education programs at Air University provide intentional debriefing time in

the curriculum to ensure reflective observation occurs after the concrete experience. Following

the concrete experience in the experiential learning cycle, learners conduct thoughtful

observation in which the learners review the incident that just occurred (Chiu, 2019). The

reflective observation phase includes dialogue between the learners and their peers or instructors

during a debriefing session after the concrete experience (Reed, 2020).

Debriefing is a process of reflection (Reed, 2020) that Kolb and Kolb (2007) associate

with the "reflecting learning style" (p. 200). The reflection concept in learning is vital to military

officers because it aids their development as leaders. Experiential learning allows individuals to

develop leadership skills and capabilities by reflecting and implementing desired behaviors that

correlate with the individual's industry (Holt et al., 2018). Officers in the Air National Guard are

familiar with the concept of debriefing because Air National Guard members utilize debriefing to

reflect on daily operations and communicate lessons learned and best practices. Debriefing in the

Air Force is a form of dialogue in a learning environment and the dialogue and debriefing

concept is an integral component of Air Force personnel development.

Debriefing in the Air Force is rooted in Air Force's culture and the process is a technique

that pilots utilize to provide feedback following their training or mission flights. Specifically,

debriefing is a method to reflect on a recent event and provide analysis, through discussion, of

performance strengths and weaknesses (Keiser & Arthur, 2020; Wasserman et al., 2018).

Although debriefing is a pilot-centric concept, the art of debriefing is woven into the Air Force

culture and occurs in every Air National Guard occupation. The debriefing method is similar to a

feedback culture in education, where the feedback intends to identify gaps or student weaknesses

and communicate areas students are doing well or student strengths (Sekulich, 2020). Regarding

adult learning, Knowles et al. (2015) agree that feedback is a tool to encourage adult learners when performance is correct or inject educative information when execution is incorrect.

Civilian and military institutions have moved towards a style of education incorporating more discussion and feedback than lectures. A curriculum centered on collaboration, student discussion, blended learning activities, and fewer instructor-led briefings is common in military education programs (Culkin, 2018). As a student in a military education program, feedback is provided by faculty, peers, and non-military personnel at the respective schoolhouses. It is crucial that the debriefing environment is inclusive and that feedback occurs from all members involved. In an effective debrief environment, all parties are viewed as equal, regardless of age, rank, or title (Wasserman et al., 2018) and the debrief is self-led (Keiser & Arthur, 2020). This concept of student-initiated assessments aligns with the teaching on andragogy that adult learners perform better when they are part of the evaluation process (Knowles et al., 2015).

Summary

Professional military education is essential to the growth and development of military personnel. All officers enrolled in the senior development education (SDE) professional military education program are adults and have served in the military for over a decade. Adult learners possess unique learning characteristics divergent from traditional pedagogy. The theory of andragogy, or adult learning theory, provides enlightening principles, while Kolb's experiential learning theory serves as the theoretical framework to assess an adult academic program. The professional military education environment leverages students' experiences to implement active learning, debriefing, and immersive learning techniques to enhance student understanding.

Professional military education programs are a mandatory component of force development for military officers. The Department of Defense mandates each service agency to

design and implement outcome-based professional development programs aligned with the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's policies and directives for all enlisted and officer professional military education (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2022). The Department of Defense invests significant resources in educating and training military personnel, including resources invested in integrating allied and partnered nations.

Professional military education is distinctive from military training and is significant to the growth and development of military officers. Professional military education programs are essential because they instruct experienced military personnel and incorporate the principles emphasized in the adult learning theory to enrich learning. Air Force officer development programs leverage the debriefing culture of professional military experience to inform the curriculum and aid students in constructing new knowledge and viewpoints.

Although there is significant literature on adult learning in various educational environments, there is insufficient literature on professional military education. Specifically, no current literature exists on the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers enrolled in a professional military education program at Air University. This research effort examining professional military education emphasized the difference between military education and training programs and provided a better understanding of Air National Guard students' personal and professional development at Air University.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

My phenomenology aimed to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air University. This chapter describes the research design and reiterates the research questions proposed in Chapter One. The site of the research study and information regarding the participants provide context to the personnel and facilities involved in the research study. The positionality describes the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions associated with the research study, and my role as the researcher. The procedures section details the permission and recruitment plan. The data collection section highlights the interviews, focus groups, and writing prompt details. Finally, the trustworthiness section highlights the attempts to ensure this study is credible, dependable, transferable, and includes ethical considerations.

Research Design

The purpose of this research study was to identify and communicate the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers participating in the Air War College professional military education program at Air University. Moustakas illuminated the concept of examining the phenomenon associated with lived experiences through a systematic approach (Liao et al., 2021). This study utilized a phenomenological approach as the research design. A phenomenological study communicates individuals' lived experiences during a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a hermeneutic approach because this study focused on the experiences of Air National Guard officers attending Air War College and I sought to understand their experiences of this phenomenon (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2019). Max van Manen (2014) suggests that phenomenology exists between how individuals think, feel, and act and a hermeneutic

phenomenology is an interpretive approach (Suddick et al., 2020).

Capturing human emotions and feelings during an experience is challenging, and hermeneutic phenomenology aims to provide a rich description of the lived experiences phenomenon (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The hermeneutic phenomenological method offered by van Manen allows the researcher to balance the objective and subjective approach through interpretive techniques (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2019). Van Manen claims that phenomenology attempts to understand the lived experience, while hermeneutics seeks to interpret the descriptions of that experience (Santiago et al., 2020). Utilizing van Manen's approach, I applied an empirical and reflective approach through descriptions provided from interviews, observations, and conversations about the participants' personal experiences (Fuster-Guillen, 2019).

Research Questions

The research questions identified and stated in Chapter One are listed below.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers in the resident professional military education program at Air War College?

Sub-Question One

How is learning influenced by observing, conceptualizing, or applying knowledge gained during the professional military education program experience at Air War College?

Sub-Question Two

How are practical activities implemented to enhance the experience at Air War College?

Site and Participants

This section provides information on the site utilized to conduct the research and describes the profile of the participants recruited for this research study. I did not isolate the research site to a specific setting before conducting the research, nor was the location selected for convenience. Instead, specific factors made the chosen location a sound option for conducting the study. I restricted the profile of the participants to the specific criteria required to meet the research needs. The participant selection criteria were specific to the study and incorporated individuals in the Air National Guard who are Air War College resident program students. Although there were Air War College students not participating in the resident program, participants for this study were required to be Air National Guard members enrolled in the resident Air War College program at Air University, so the profile was less flexible than the research site.

Site

Air University, an Air Force establishment with a primary mission to educate and train military personnel, was the site for this research study. The organizational structure of Air University was consistent with a typical military organizational structure and an educational environment. The organizational structure wais hierarchal and contained civilian and military personnel in academic and military positions. Air University had a base commander who also served as the president of the educational institution. Air War College had a commander who also served as the commandant and oversaw the student body, curriculum, faculty, and facilities.

The reason I selected this particular research site was that it was an institution that delivered professional military education programs through a traditional classroom method to

Air National Guard officers. Air National Guard members have been participating in education programs at the research site for years and, although the location lacked an equal representation of Air National Guard members as it does active duty component members (McCarthy et al., 2014), the site offered the largest population of Air National Guard officers in a resident strategic development education program. The research site was a large military base with an educational campus and provided resources such as a library, private classrooms, office space, communication and technological capabilities, and working hours that were beneficial to conducting the research study. The potential to engage with Air National Guard officers enrolled in a professional military education program and the resources available at Air University made the research site a desirable location to conduct the research study.

Participants

The participants in this study were Air National Guard officers enrolled in the resident Air War College program at Air University. There were three officer professional military education programs at Air University, but this study focused on the Air National Guard members participating in strategic development education at Air War College. I identified twelve participants to participate in this study. Due to the limited number of Air National Guard students at Air University for Air War College, I selected the participants from multiple academic years. In addition to the variation in academic years, the participants' age, ethnicity, and gender varied because those demographics were not factors utilized for selecting the personnel in the education programs. The participants' military experience and years of service varied; however, all participants possessed more than ten years of military service. I identified the participants' qualifications based on their participation in Air War College and asked each participant to volunteer to participate in the research study.

Researcher Positionality

The work of Lev Vygotsky and his notion of social constructivism were significant to this research study because of the interpretive framework's influence in understanding the lived experiences at Air University. The concepts discussed in social constructivism aligned with my understanding of learning and how an individual gains knowledge. I believe that principal learning occurs in social settings and the learner's perspective is a significant component of the learning process. In addition to my perspective on learning, my philosophical assumptions are discussed in this section regarding ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Finally, I considered my role as the researcher in this study.

Interpretive Framework

This research study utilized social constructivism as an interpretive framework to frame the research study. Lev Vygotsky is the pioneer of social constructivism and asserted that social and collaborative interactions are critical for understanding reality and the exchanges allow learners to construct new information and gain new knowledge from the experiences (Du Plessis, 2020). Vygotsky (2004) claims that individuals possess the capability to gain new knowledge and increase their understanding by using their imagination and shared experiences, even though the individuals enter the situation with a specific perspective from past experiences. This means that an individual can learn and gain experiential understanding through shared stories without the requirement of directly witnessing the event (Vygotsky, 2004). The environment at Air University provided ample opportunities for the participants to learn and collaborate in a social environment with a diverse network of learners because of the dialogue construct and tremendous diversity in the student body.

Vygotsky stated that individuals demonstrated the ability to gain a higher understanding

through discussions and engagement in a learning environment (Hoon & Singh, 2019). Through the interaction and sharing of information, learners construct and distribute new knowledge to other individuals (Hoon & Singh, 2019). The learners at Air University were engaged in a long-term education program and interact and share information daily. Air University required students to attend class and instructors took rollcall each day. The instructors graded the students on classroom participation and the learning environment centered around student discussions and interactions.

Philosophical Assumptions

Identifying and recognizing the beliefs and philosophical assumptions underlying the research study is crucial (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify four philosophical assumptions often utilized in qualitative research. The philosophical assumptions addressed in this section are ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Ontological assumptions are an individual's beliefs about reality, epistemological assumptions are beliefs about knowledge, and axiological assumptions are beliefs about an individual's values in the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I recognize that my worldview shaped my research approach, so this section intended to provide the lens through which I view the world and give context to my research approach.

Ontological Assumption

Individuals possess different perspectives and approach research studies with varying viewpoints, so the researcher needs to convey the ontological view of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontology is a worldview assumption and describes the beliefs about what constitutes reality (Hall & Hill, 2019). My worldview aligned with a traditional realism worldview. Traditional realism posits that the existence of God is as certain as the existence of

the external world (Piazza, 2021). Although an individual believes an element does not exist, that does not change the fact that the specific item does exist. This concept extends to God. Although some people believe God does not exist, God still exists despite their contrary belief. Therefore, I believe that there are objective realities and the realities exist outside of individual thought.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology is the science of examining and understanding how individuals comprehend information and knowledge about what they perceive as reality (Becker & Niehaves, 2007). Ultimately, it conveys how an individual arrives at a genuine understanding (Becker & Niehaves, 2007). Similar to my ontological worldview of traditional realism, my view of epistemology was from an epistemological realist viewpoint. Epistemological realism posits that it is conceivable to attain an objective cognition of an objective reality (Becker & Niehaves, 2007). Knowledge exists regardless of an individual's understanding or acceptance of the knowledge. If a person is not aware of certain knowledge, it does not mean that the information is not still valid. The information is true regardless of the individual's recognition or understanding of the knowledge. Therefore, I believe there is knowledge and understanding independent of a particular individual.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumptions are the values of the researcher and the role the values play in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiology is significant in selecting research questions and the purpose of researching because axiological assumptions refer to things the researcher values (Biddle & Schafft, 2015). I am a member of the Air National Guard and come from a military family. The military and the education and training that developed the United States military were significant to my life and role as a researcher. Although I was vested in the

Air National Guard, my Christian values reflected the core values asserted by Air Force culture. The Air Force's core values are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all you do (Chengming, 2007). These core values shaped my approach to this research study and I upheld these core values during the entire process.

Researcher's Role

This study focused on Air National Guard officers attending the Air War College professional military education program at Air University. Although I was an officer in the Air National Guard during this study, I was not assigned to Air University and had no authority over the participants. I had a working relationship with the Air National Guard liaison at Air University, I was familiar with the research site's campus and organizational structure, and I had participated in a residential program at the institution. However, I did not have a personal relationship with the Air National Guard officers selected to participate in the research study nor the academic instructors delivering the curriculum to the participants.

A phenomenological research design describes the lived experiences of a group of individuals about a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My role as the researcher was to highlight the lived experiences and identify themes in the collected data. Although there was a potential for bias or assumptions because of my organizational affiliation in the Air National Guard, my association with the Air National Guard did not impact the data collection or data analysis procedures because my affiliation was not with Air University or the education and training sectors in the Air National Guard. My organization was independent of the education and training mission and I was not under the Air University chain of command. The independence from the education and training mission in the Air National Guard allowed me to

conduct research at Air University and approach data collection and data analysis procedures from an unbiased perspective.

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

The procedure section includes the permissions and recruitment plan for this research study. The permissions section includes Institutional Review Board approval from Liberty University and the approval is located in Appendix A. The permissions ensured I acquired the necessary approval to conduct research at the chosen site and ensured the recruitment plan met the required sample for a qualitative study.

Permissions

This research study was conducted under the guidance of Liberty University and at an Air National Guard base in the southeastern sector of the United States. Liberty University required an Institutional Review Board approval letter to conduct this study. I placed the Institutional Review Board approval letter in Appendix A.

Recruitment Plan

A quantitative research approach asserts claims from a population and utilizes the sample to address the claim; however, qualitative samples focus on understanding the participants' experiences and requires a thorough examination (Polkinghorne, 2005). Samples in a qualitative research study are small because of the extensive time required for each participant and the samples are purposeful because of their relationship to a specific phenomenon (Vasileiou et al., 2018). A phenomenological study utilizes a small sample size, and although a sample size of one would suffice, the goal of a phenomenological study is to examine and discover the commonalities of an experience (Dukes, 1984). A phenomenological study should consist of a participant sample size of between two and 25 individuals and it is essential to identify the

sample size required for the specific study (Alase, 2017).

The participants selected should represent a homogenous sample that correlates with the research topic and shares the phenomenon under examination (Alase, 2017). I recruited the participants from a list of graduates or students at the officer professional military programs at Air University and the participants were Air National Guard members. I emailed all of the Air National Guard officers attending Air War College over the last three years at Air University and conducted in-person informational briefs at each program to identify and recruit potential participants. The only academic program identified in this study was Air War College, so I recruited 12 participants from the past four years of Air War College at Air University. I provided the participants with information on the research requirements, including the time needed for data collection, and allowed them to ask questions regarding the procedures. Due to the military structure, I informed the participants' chain of command, when necessary, prior to the research study and provided information on each participant's requirements.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection is a significant aspect of the research study because it provides the required qualitative data on the participant's lived experiences. Data is a term in qualitative studies that means accounts and it is the information gathered from the participant that is independent of the researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005). Identifying the participant's experiences is the primary reason for data collection in a qualitative research study (Polkinghorne, 2005). After the data collection period, data will be reduced to substantive information, categorized into specific category systems, and triangulated with multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). The data analysis method described by Lincoln and Guba enhances the trustworthiness of the

research study (Fernández-Alonso et al., 2021). This study collected data from semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts.

Individual Interviews

Interviews are a data collection technique utilized in qualitative research studies when the interviewer seeks a subjective opinion from the participant (McGrath et al., 2019). Although the interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, the semi-structured approach provides some structure to the process and allows the researcher to ask additional or follow-up questions for clarification (Gill et al., 2008). The semi-structured interview consists of questions selected by the researcher and all participants are asked the same questions with a very similar flow (Dahlberg et al., 2010). The opportunity to ask follow-up or clarifying questions allowed me to ensure the initial question was understood and addressed in a manner consistent with the intent of the question. Committee members reviewed the interview questions before conducting the research study.

The interviews for this study occurred over an internet communication medium and in a private room with no external distractions or interruptions.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your experience with professional military education. CRQ

2. How has the Air War College experience been similar or different from previous military education experiences? CRQ

3. What experiences surprised you during the course of the program? CRQ

4. What did you observe in class that enhanced your learning or development? SQ1

5. Describe some observations of the class dynamic. SQ1

6. What opportunities did you have to reflect on the classroom discussions and lectures? SQ1

7. Describe the debriefing or dialogue culture at Air War College. SQ2

8. Describe the classroom activities that require practical application of the information taught. SQ2

9. Describe how joint and international students integrated into the discussions and practical exercises. SQ2

10. How would you describe the experience to senior officers? CRQ

11. How would you describe the experience to junior officers? CRQ

12. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences at Air University? CRQ

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis involves examining, cataloging, and charting the data and the goal of data analysis is to reduce the overall amount of data (Rabiee, 2004). Analyzing data that highlights specific information, identifies patterns and consistent information, and contrasts with the framework outlined in the literature, and displays the results with various types of charts, diagrams, and figures is a data analysis strategy for interviews in a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary component of data analysis for an interview is the spoken language; however, reporting the setting of the interview and capturing the non-verbal expressions provide additional context to the data collected (Rabiee, 2004).

This research study utilized a thematic analysis approach because the thematic analysis approach is a well-proven and common analytic approach to qualitative research studies (Xu, 2020). The first phase of the thematic analysis approach focused on understanding the data and

familiarizing myself with the research texts (Braun & Clark, 2006). The first step of analyzing

data from the interview process involved coding the transcripts using the concepts of a

qualitative analysis program (Lillis, 1999). After the initial open coding was conducted, I began

axial coding and assembled the data in a new manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This occurred in

the second phase of the thematic analysis, the generating codes phase (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The third phase gathered the data identified in the coding process and identified themes (Braun

& Clark, 2006). During this step, the coding process established text units and themes associated

with the text units (Lillis, 1999). I identified the common themes regarding the central questions

of the research study and grouped the transcript data into the common themes. I reviewed and

consolidated the information in the theme groupings to present a consistent picture of the data

analysis themes. The fourth phase focused on reviewing the themes to generate a thematic image

of the research study (Braun & Clark, 2006). I defined and labeled the themes in the fifth phase

of the analysis process (Braun & Clark, 2006). Finally, I composed the themes and reviewed the

transcripts to ensure the themes provided an accurate description of the data (Braun & Clark,

2006).

Focus Groups

A focus group is a technique that utilizes group interviewing and allows the participants

to discuss their thoughts (Dahlberg et al., 2010). The group typically consists of six to 10

participants and the researcher schedules the session for one to two hours (Dahlberg et al., 2010).

An essential component of focus groups is the conversation between the participants; the

researcher must not dominate the conversation or disrupt the dialogue between the focus group

participants (Dahlberg et al., 2010).

I conducted two focus groups for this study, with three participants in each focus group. I

conducted the focus groups over a virtual communication tool, which is the same site as the interviews, and the participants identified a time that they were available to participate in the focus group. There was a diverse mixture between the Air War College year groups in each focus group to ensure a homogenous grouping between the two separate focus groups.

Focus Group Questions

1. Please describe how the Air War College experience increased your knowledge and development. CRQ

2. Describe your most memorable learning moment at Air War College. SQ1

3. Describe how professional discourse enhanced the discussions. SQ1

4. How did the diverse environment contribute to learning? CRQ

5. What are experiences at Air University that are not available at a National Guard base? CRQ

6. Describe an event that included practical applications of information discussed at Air War College. SQ2

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

A constant comparison analysis approach was the data analysis plan for the focus group data. There were two focus groups for the research study and I utilized the constant comparison method because it is a technique used when there are multiple focus groups for the same study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). A constant comparative analysis starts with grouping the data into small elements, then descriptors are assigned to the elements, assigning the identified descriptors to specific categories, and the researcher creates themes to group the categories (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This approach was beneficial because the I was able to identify if themes from one focus group were consistent with themes identified by the other focus group (Onwuegbuzie et al.,

2009).

Following the constant comparison analysis, the data analysis of the focus group information reflected the method utilized for the individual interview data analysis. I evaluated the transcripts and I began open coding. Axial coding followed and the emergent themes emerged as data was categorized. I examined the themes and compared the themes to the information provided in the individual information to gain an understanding of the composite research data and to aid in identifying if any additional questions needed to be addressed with a writing prompt.

Writing Prompt

The writing prompts are guided by the central research questions and aim to uncover targeted experiences through the facilitation of self-narration (Adler et al., 2017). I grounded the writings in Kolb's experiential learning theory because the writings should reflect the theoretical context of the study (Adler et al., 2017). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the participant to construct the phenomenon by personally interpreting the situation (Lauterbach, 2018). The prompt approach enabled the participants to formulate a self-description of the experience through writing and utilized a different medium from the conversational approach to capture the phenomenon. The prompts followed the individual interviews and the focus group sessions.

Writing Prompt Questions

1. Describe in detail, from when you wake up to when you go to bed, a typical education day at Air War College. CRQ

2. Describe in detail a unique experience or interaction at Air War College that you have not experienced in any other military setting. CRQ

3. Compare and contrast the year at Air War College to other professional military

    education or professional development programs. CRQ

Writing Prompt Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan for the writing prompt focused on utilizing a thematic analysis

method to analyze the writing prompt data and identify consistent themes from the written

responses. Thematic analysis is a respected technique used to identify and extract patterns from

written communication from participants in a research study (Swart, 2019). Specifically,

thematic analysis is a descriptive analysis technique that reduced the copious amount of data to a

set of themes that I could communicate (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Data Synthesis

The synthesis technique utilized for this study was a thematic synthesis. Thematic

synthesis is a tried and tested method utilizing the coding of text with a line-by-line approach,

developing descriptive themes, and creating analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). I

learned the systematic approach and overall concept used by popular software programs and

developed a hand-written system to perform the data synthesis process and help manage the

transcripts, audio files, and writings acquired during the research study.

<div align="center">

Trustworthiness

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Trustworthiness is significant to research studies because my study sought to report

investigated data, and the information must be perceived to be truthful. Lincoln and Guba

proposed criteria based on the terms "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and

"confirmability," which were based on the postpositivist concepts of internal validity, external

validity, reliability, and objectivity (Barusch et al., 2011, p. 11). Although the determination of

the trustworthiness of this study is subjective, addressing the study's credibility, transferability, and dependability enhanced the research study's perception.

Credibility

Credibility references the trustworthiness of a research study and it determines how believable the study is perceived (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation provides multiple data points describing different components of the phenomenon and is a technique used to enhance research credibility and validity (Noble & Heale, 2019). Another method that enhances credibility is peer debriefing. Peer debriefing requires the researcher to provide details about the research study's processes and procedures to a peer and receive feedback on the approach, potential biases, and other aspects of the study that need questioning (Barusch et al., 2011). Triangulation and peer debriefing were utilized in this research study to enhance the study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability of the research to relate or fit in applications external to the study (Koch, 1994). Qualitative scholars should seek transferability because it enhances the potential utility of the study's findings. This research study provides transferability to officers in the Air National Guard seeking to attend professional military education programs at Air University. In addition, the study also provides some transferability to officers seeking to participate in an officer professional military education program at a sister service or joint education program because the academic and experiential components are similar across all officer professional military education programs.

This study ensures transferability through thick and rich descriptions of the research process and the studied phenomenon. Researchers achieve a thick description by descriptive

information about the research setting, participants, and observed interactions (Polit & Beck, 2010). A thin description is a process that only puts forth the facts of the study and does not provide additional context to allow the reader to understand things such as the tone of the participants in the interview or specific pauses that occur during the dialogue (Fitzpatrick, 2019). I accounted for additional details like the tone of the participants, details regarding the setting of the study other than the specific location, and similar information that extended beyond facts and provided additional context to the research study.

Dependability

Dependability is the degree of consistency that assesses the difference between the respondent results from the participants instead of differences in how the question is perceived or addressed (Marshall, 2005). A critical aspect of dependability is the ability of the process to be audited (Koch, 1994). The peer-review process provided feedback and served as a mini audit of the questions, gathered data, and data collection process. In addition, the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director provided a thorough review to ensure the research study possessed dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability involves the researcher demonstrating how interpretations were made, and confirmability is recognized when the researcher successfully achieves dependability, transferability, and credibility (Koch, 1994). Although I had biases toward Air National Guard personnel, I did not have any motivations or interests surrounding Air University. Triangulation and audits aided in generating confirmability. Ultimately, I established confirmability by the research study meeting the elements of credibility, dependability, and transferability.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations for this study focused on the participants and data collection. The participants understood that their participation in the study was on a volunteer basis and that they could disengage at any point during the study. The data collected will be secured in a password-protected file and destroyed three years after I conducted the research study. There were no physical risks to participating in this research study; however, there was a potential risk of information provided by the participants reflecting back on the participant. I utilized generic terms and pseudo names and eliminated any other defining information identifying participants to mitigate the risk. Due to the small number of individuals participating in the professional military education programs from the Air National Guard, I masked most demographic information and identifying information from the final report.

Although I cannot guarantee anonymity for group discussions, I asked the participants to sign a form that encouraged the confidentiality of information discussed and asked them not to address the discussions outside of the focus group session. There was no way to ensure the information was not discussed after the focus group session; however, the participants were all military members. Keeping information confidential during a specific conversation is common in the military, and requesting the members maintain confidentiality mitigated the potential of members discussing information after the focus group session.

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Summary

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This research study utilized a hermeneutical phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers enrolled in professional military education programs at Air University. The data collected included information from individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts. The approach to data analysis was a thematic data analysis

approach and it sought to reduce the data, categorize the data, generate themes from the data, and report the themes and patterns.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenology was to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air War College. In Chapter Four, I presented the findings of my study and described the results of my data analysis. This chapter begins with a description of the participants that volunteered for my research. Following the participant description, narrative themes describe the data I collected throughout the individual interviews, written prompts, and focus groups. This chapter concludes by answering the central research question and sub-research questions.

Participants

This study focused on the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers at Air War College. The number of participants varies depending on whether the research study is qualitative or quantitative. As described in Chapter Three, the participants in this study had to be Air National Guard officers and have experience as students at the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base. I solicited the participants for the study by utilizing the Air National Guard advisor at Air University and snowballing from recommendations of early adopter participants. The participants' were overwhelmingly excited and my participant list included three alternate names due to such a positive response and willingness to participate.

Table 1

ANG AWC Participants

AWC Participant	Sex	Age	Highest Degree Earned	Air Force Specialty	Years Experience
Col Jones	M	49	Masters	Intelligence Officer	30
Col Philips	M	52	Masters	Logistics	30

Lt Col Smith	F	43	Masters	Security Forces	21
Lt Col Jacob	F	41	Masters	Health Services	23
Lt Col Gregory	M	42	Masters	Cyberspace Operations	18
Lt Col Duncan	F	47	Masters	Force Support	28
Lt Col Clarke	F	51	Masters	Force Support	30
Lt Col Corey	M	54	Juris Doctorate	Executive Officer	37
Lt Col Burns	M	51	Masters	Civil Engineer	31
Lt Col Ivey	M	44	Masters	Military Pilot	21
Lt Col Stevenson	M	45	Masters	Military Pilot	28
Lt Col Allen	M	47	Masters	Intelligence	26

Results

Following extensive data collection utilizing a triangulation from semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and feedback from written prompts, clear themes emerged from the data collected. The themes were consistent with each participant and identified through a popular thematic analysis technique. The primary themes identified were: encouraged and dedicated reflection, learning through dialogue, a focus on highlighting diverse experiences, and applying learned concepts. In addition to the primary themes, I identified consistent concepts and ideas as sub-themes that aligned with the primary themes. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 depict how the themes align with the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2015) concept.

The sub-themes that emerged from the theme of encouraged and dedicated reflection were the power of metacognition and structured reflection time. The sub-themes under the learning through dialogue theme were academic freedom and candid conversations, and the impact of shared experiences. The sub-themes that emerged from the focus on highlighting diverse experiences theme were learning through diverse modalities and diverse military perspectives. The sub-themes under the applying learned concepts theme were enjoyable practical events and interactions during active experimentation.

Figure 4.1 Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory diagram (Kolb, 2015)
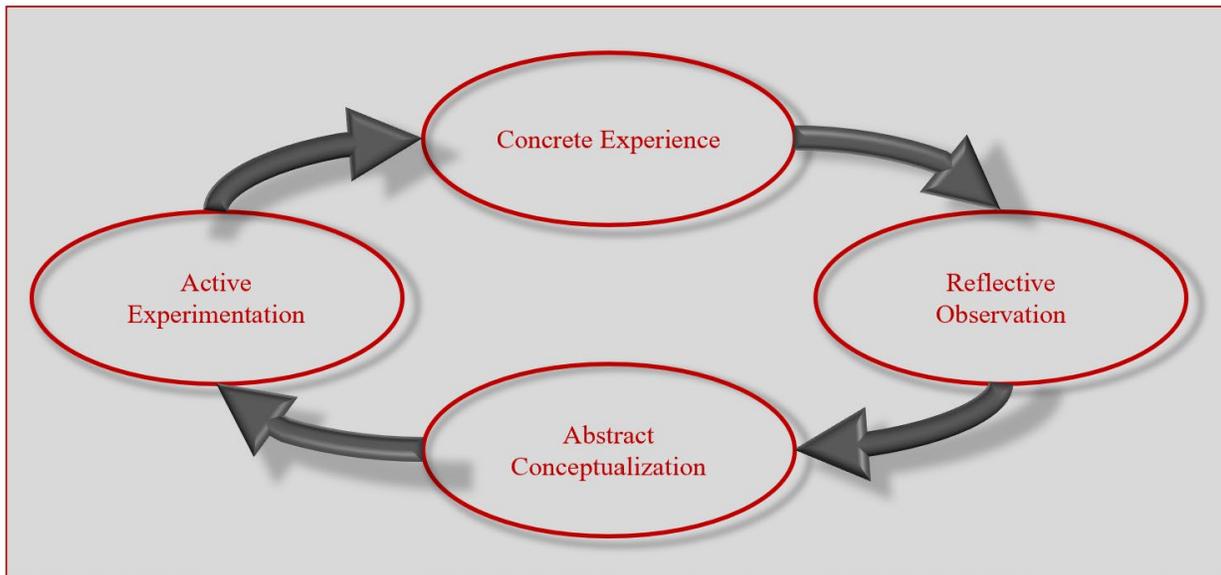
Figure 4.2 Themes From This Study
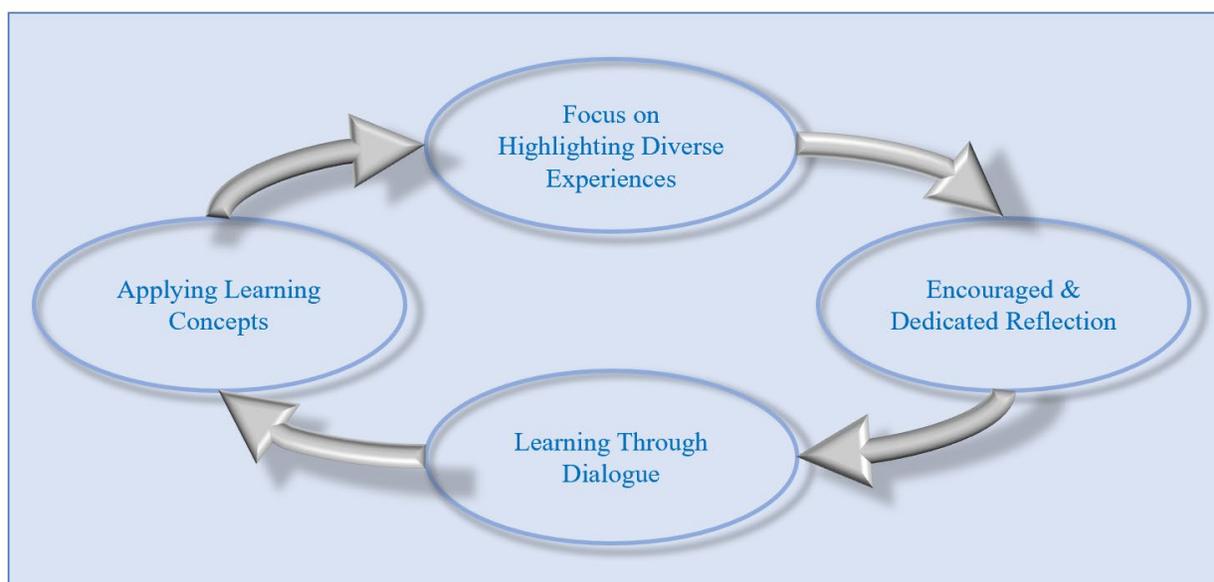
Encouraged and Dedicated Reflection

Focused reflection in the learning process is beneficial and dialogue with peers and teachers that stimulates reflection enhances understanding (Morris, 2020). The Air National Guard members who attend Air War College were encouraged to reflect during their entire 10-month course and were provided dedicated time to focus on introspection geared towards personal and professional development. Lt Col Gregory stated, "this course also has a big focus on self-reflection. We were given journals to catalog our thoughts and also asked to do introspection regarding our leadership style over the years." The dedicated and focused reflection generated and revealed new thoughts for the Air War College students. Lt Col Gregory spoke about the "requirements day," or dedicated days to concentrate on self-reflection, and said it provided an opportunity to reflect on the information learned and focus on the written assignments. The focused effort and encouragement to reflect during the year were illuminating. Col Jones described the Air War College experience as "a significant aperture opening experience for me" and spoke about his reflection on the experience of engaging with the other

individuals at Air War College, saying, "you really kind of open your eyes and get a different perspective."

The Power of Metacognition

Metacognition is the process of learning how to learn and focuses on the learners' ability to plan, monitor, and regulate the learning process (Demir, 2019). Lt Col Burns said something on which he reflected and recognized that the course highlighted "the need to critically think through things." While Col Philips said "in the Air War College resident program, it was more deep thinking." The focus on developing the students' thinking process and challenging the students to enhance their self-awareness and self-understanding was significant. Col Philips said the "self-development and reflection opportunities were very transformative and prepared me for my current role." Overall, the educational experience was described as beneficial and informative. Lt Col Smith mentioned scheduled days of reflection built into the curriculum and said, "we get our days which are called *requirement* days and what I've done is the reflection on my former assignments," describing her experiences as "seeing that ability to critically and creatively think" and said "it has been really useful."

Structured Reflection Time

Air War College was described as being structured with dedicated time allotted for reflection and introspection. Lt Col Ivey said "you're allotted time in the afternoon to reflect and one of the key things that they told us is you're here to read, write, and reflect and that's truly what happened." The structured time was crucial because it provided opportunities to learn by engaging in self-development or collaborative development. A recent study highlighted the enhanced learning that occurs when students are provided dedicated time to reflect and discuss both curriculum and non-curriculum during the course of a learning program (Swanson &

Schweiss, 2019). All of the participants described the course structure and ways it provided opportunities for downtime to reflect. Lt Col Duncan described the typical day as " reading before class to prepare, going to the auditorium for lecture, moving to the classrooms to discuss the readings and lecture, eating lunch with classmates, and then going to the library after class to read, write, and study." Although the times before and after class varied slightly, all participants described a process of reflection or preparation prior to class and reflection and preparation after the seminar discussions. The additional benefit of the structured environment is not having the external distractions that surround the Air National Guard officers in their regular daily routines. Lt Col Burns said, "you had time to think because you didn't have the outside noise."

Learning Through Dialogue

Experiential learning concepts often highlight the significance of feedback, debriefing, and other interactive discussions that result in "learning conversations" (Tavares et al., 2020). Lt Col Corey described how the resident students learned from other people's experiences by listening and discussing the different perspectives and life experiences of the individuals in the classroom together. The learning opportunities were enhanced at Air War College because the seminar room students all have significant military experience and were considered top performers in their career fields. Lt Col Stevenson recognized the significance of the relationships and discussion, saying "the ability to have better connections and learn more from their (classmates) experiences" enhanced the interactions and discussions. Lt Col Duncan expounded on that concept and highlighted the growth and development that occurs saying, "the discussions that you have with people that have different thoughts and experiences is really where the mind growth comes."

Academic Freedom and Candid Conversations

Experiential learning is enriched if a space is provided that is perceived as a safe place to be open, honest, and genuine during discussions (Marshall & Martin, 2019). The dialogue that occurs in an academic environment is restricted if students are hesitant to be transparent about their thoughts and experiences, or if the institution limits the conversation and discourages honest conversations. Lt Col Jacobs said Air War College had Chatham House rules and it allowed the dialogue to be open and honest. Lt Col Ivey said, "the academic freedom was vital, you know, just being in a space where our presenters were able to speak freely. All of the students were able to speak freely, ask questions freely; it really set the stage for an environment of learning." The depth of the relationships between the students and instructors provided another element critical for candid conversations. Lt Col Duncan said, "we have academic freedom and the longer that you're there together, the more open and really truthful you can be with your team." The openness led to deeper discussion. Col Philips described the impact relationships had on the dialogue and said the discussions "dive into a deeper level of conversation because things build" on each other over the 10-month course. All of the participants provided feedback that they were energized to hear peers speak truthfully and without reservation because people knew there was academic freedom and it was non-attribution.

The Impact of Shared Experiences

Knowledge is transferred and created through the dialogue of shared experiences and the reflective process that occurs after sharing those experiences (Gong et al., 2022). The discussions in the seminar room and outside of the classroom provided ample opportunities for the Air War College students to share experiences and transfer knowledge through dialogue. Col Philips emphasized the opportunity to be in-residence with a cohort of diverse perspectives and

experiences and said, "the environment created a lot of opportunity to share the experiences and learn from each other." This was a distinct difference highlighted by most participants that distinguished the resident program from other correspondence professional military education programs. Lt Col Stevenson stated that the resident experience was more beneficial than a correspondence course because it "provides an opportunity to learn more from personal experiences than just simply answering the question and replying to a discussion board."

Focus on Highlighting Diverse Experiences

Air University described diversity as a force multiplier and stated that a diverse and inclusive organization is a desired goal (Air University, 2023). The variety of Air Force Specialty Codes and backgrounds generates a class with distinct experiences and different perspectives on critical issues. Lt Col Smith said "we have very deliberately curated seminar groups that are very diverse and so you get a broad range of experience and a broad range of thought." Lt Col Ivey said he realized he was in a seminar with people who "operationally have been there and they have stories to tell. They've cut their teeth operationally and have a vast background of information and experiences." In addition to strategically arranging students based on diverse specialty codes, Air War College also designed the faculty to be diverse in experience. Col Philips said "I thought our faculty actually did a really excellent job because we had a PhD civilian, a Marine Corps instructor, and an Air Force instructor. So having the different backgrounds in the faculty, they were able to help facilitate meaningful discussions."

Learning Through Diverse Modalities

The diversity at Air War College extended to the multiple modalities utilized to instruct and educate the student body. Col Bailey said the students are "getting lots of modalities of learning that are engaged" while in residence. Lt Col Gregory noted the same concept and

highlighted the guest speakers, trained instructors, peer discussions, writings, electives, trips, practical exercises, and research studies. The students enjoyed a diverse group of speakers each week prior to their scheduled seminar meetings. Lt Col Jacob said there were various speakers, ranging from four-star general officers to corporate leaders of Fortune 500 companies, that provided lectures and stimulated complex discussions in the seminar rooms. The electives were a highlight that offered a unique opportunity for the participants. Col Philips spoke in depth about his elective experience and said "I was able to participate in the Leadership Horizon Program, which provided an introspective, reflective, and transformative leadership development experience. This experience helped me develop an increased capacity to operate and influence within the human domain (emotional intelligence, coaching, building connections, developing others, and idealized influential leadership)." Though there were various modalities, the seminar discussions were unanimously the most impactful. Lt Col Smith said "I really point to the people that you get to meet and how different the ideas are that you could be exposed to, how it gets you out of your comfort zone, and, back to that diversity of thought, how you get to marinate in something completely different from anything you've experienced before for an entire year."

Diverse Military Perspective

The discussions in the seminar rooms highlighted the divergent thoughts on the military approach and the different perspectives on national security strategies. Col Philips said he recognized the benefit of the diversity of thought when "three different groups were working on the same problem and were able to then come together and see how these different groups were solving the problem or addressing and developing the plan at various stages. And we're able to compare their way of thinking and what they came up with, with ours. So that created an initial layer of learning." It was important for the Air National Guard officers to hear the international

officers' perspective and understand potential misconceptions of previous wars. Lt Col Burns stated hearing the "US strategy and policies (from the international officers) was very interesting because they don't necessarily agree with how the United States is approaching things" and it stimulated honest dialogue on strategic issues. Military leaders who are unaware of external perspectives or military organizations that promote groupthink because divergent opinions are not encouraged, are more likely to make ill-advised national security decisions (Elder, 2019).

Applying Learned Concepts

The students learned by applying discovered concepts through practical workshops and exercises, a concept referred to as learning by doing through active experimentation by David Kolb (Taheri et al., 2021). The Air National Guard participants all described practical components of the resident program that enhanced the learning during the course of the year. Lt Col Stevenson discussed the joint planning process exercises and said "I'm very practical. I kind of learned by doing, so having the opportunity to work with my seminar group and see how they do it and then do the exercise" was beneficial. All participants had a similar experience that involved reflecting on their previous experience, incorporating newly learned experiences from peers, writings, speakers, or faculty, and applying new concepts to their classroom exercises or military position.

Enjoyable Practical Events

The Regional Securities Studies trip was an event that immersed the students in a different country and allowed them to engage and apply concepts through discussions with foreign senior military and civilian leaders. The Air National Guard officers attending the resident program appreciated the unique opportunities and environments to experiment with ideas and concepts actively. Lt Col Ivey discussed his Regional Securities Studies experience

and said "each day was filled with engagements that highlighted Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure, Physical Environment, and Time (PMESII-PT) aspects of the Eastern African Region. We met with military leadership, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, news media, local business owners, etc." In addition to the Regional Securities Studies trip, Air War College offered multiple exercise events on-campus. Numerous students referenced the non-traditional methods to engage in exercises and claimed the engagements helped stimulate critical thinking. The other significant event that all of the participants mentioned during the interview process was the Joint Planning exercise that occurred as the course capstone event. Lt Col Jacob said "There are a lot of experiences like joint planning and a Guardsman is just not going to get that much exposure to the joint planning process at their base. So here we're doing actual war gaming things I've never done."

Interactions During Active Experimentation

Networking, engaging in dialogue, and experimenting with peers at Air War College were significant components of the participants' overall experience. Lt Col Clark said "I think that the greatest benefit is the networking, the discussions that are had amongst the students, and the experiences we shared together were eye-opening." Special events occurred during the ten-month program that allowed the students to network and experiment outside of the classroom. Lt Col Smith said "I did the International Day and that was fantastic. I mean, you got to go spend an entire day getting immersed in all of these other cultures and their foods. And that was really great." Whereas another participant had the opportunity to work with the Senior Non-Commissioned Officer course off campus and apply strategies learned during the Air War College course. Lt Col Smith said "I also went over to the senior NCO Academy and acted as one of their senior leader mentors during their war gaming exercise."

Outlier Data and Findings

All participants' consensus regarding the Air War College resident program was positive. Although the participants did not identify any data that rose to the level of an outlier, there were a couple admissions that highlighted some areas that diverged from the consensus. First, some participants suggested making the speaker series more impactful. Second, several participants echoed a concern that their year invested in developing their strategic planning ability might be underutilized at their home station and demonstrated an interest in participating in a follow-on program that allowed them to utilize their new skill set.

The speakers were a source of inspiration and education for the majority of the participants. Col Jones spoke about the "caliber of speakers" and how much they challenged his perspectives. However, Lt Col Clark stated the "speakers that we've had this year have not been properly placed." According to Lt Col Clark, the speakers would be more dynamic if their topics aligned better with the topic in the curriculum. The ability to schedule senior military and civilian leaders and align them with the topic of the day was a challenge Col Philips said the Marine Command and Staff College was able to achieve because of their location to Washington D.C. Col Philips said the Marine Command and Staff College had higher profile speakers such as a Supreme Court justice, Chiefs of Staff, Authors, and multiple corporate leaders. The location of that program provided an opportunity to align schedules and invite higher-profile speakers.

Air National Guard officers who attend Air War College spend 10 months learning and developing new knowledge and skills but did not always have an opportunity to demonstrate their growth when they return to their unit. Lt Col Smith said the Air National Guard did not "value" the in-residence program because they did not distinguish between resident graduates or correspondence graduates during force development planning. Lt Col Smith said Air National

Guard units don't "look at deliberately planning people as they leave" and "you have to work hard to get into something different if you want to do something other than exactly the job that you left." Lt Col Clark said that some Air National Guard human resource departments and specific units were discussing the concept of placing Air War College graduates following their graduation from the program; however, there was not a formal or consistent program in place.

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Research Question Responses

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I addressed the central and sub-research questions during the data collection process and the questions were supported by the themes and sub-themes identified during the coding process. Each theme or sub-theme directly aligned with one or more of the research questions and provided insight into the fundamental aspect of this study, seeking to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending the resident Air War College program. Figure 4.3 below displays the relationship between the research questions and the themes or sub-themes.

Figure 4.3 Relationship Between the Research Questions and Themes

What are the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers in the resident professional military education program at Air War College?	How is learning influenced by observing, conceptualizing, or applying knowledge gained during the professional military education program experience at Air War College?	How are practical activities implemented to enhance the experience at Air War College?
• Encouraged and dedicated reflection (Theme 1) • Structured reflection time (sub-theme 1) • Learning through dialogue (Theme 2) • Impact of shared experiences (sub theme 2) • Focus on highlighting diverse experiences (Theme 3) • Learning through diverse modalities (sub-theme 3) • Applying learning concepts (Theme 4) • Enjoyable practical events (sub-them 4) • Interaction during active experimentation (sub-theme 4)	• Encouraged and dedicated reflection (Theme 1) • Power of metacognition (sub-theme 1) • Learning through dialogue (Theme 2) • Focus on highlighting diverse experiences (Theme 3) • Diverse military perspective (sub-theme 3) • Applying learning concepts (Theme 4) • Interaction during active experimentation (sub-theme 4)	• Encouraged and dedicated reflection (Theme 1) • Learning through dialogue (Theme 2) • Academic freedom and candid conversations (sub-theme 2) • Focus on highlighting diverse experiences (Theme 3) • Learning through diverse modalities (sub-theme 3) • Applying learning concepts (Theme 4) • Enjoyable practical events (sub-theme 4)

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers in the resident professional military education program at Air War College? The participants all endorsed the resident program and spoke about the unique experiences that an individual encounters during the 10-month course. Col Philips said, "to be able to have the time and space to learn, develop, and invest in yourself with the caliber of professors, speakers, and classmates in the same place over a 10-month period was incredible." Col Philips' quote highlights critical components of the lived experiences that all of the participants shared. The time allotted to focus on personal and professional development, the discussions with a diverse and experienced group of faculty and peers, and the interactions that occurred over the course of the program were elements of the themes and sub-themes exhibited in Figure 4.3.

Sub-Question One

How is learning influenced by observing, conceptualizing, or applying knowledge gained during the professional military education program experience at Air War College? The main themes of learning through dialogue, reflection, and applying learning concepts speak directly to observing, conceptualizing, and applying the information learned while attending the resident program. Lt Col Jacob said "we've basically been marinating in all of this strategic guidance and seminar discussions for a year and I've developed a broader view of where we are, where we're headed, and where we need to go." The participants applied the concepts after conceptualizing the information during the course of the year. Lt Col Gregory said "The opportunity to have a full-blown wargame and demonstrate what we learned was a unique and rewarding experience for me."

Sub-Question Two

How are practical activities implemented to enhance the experience at Air War College? The practical activities were diverse and Air War College utilized multiple modalities to implement opportunities to apply knowledge. Lt Col Stevenson said he applied his learning through a "fair amount of writing that was beneficial," Lt Col Smith said knowledge was applied and transferred during discussions in which "somebody told a story about a prior experience" while the group worked through practical problems in class, and Col Jones described the operational planning exercises and stated, "having those debates and then applying people's inputs based on their experience made the exercises much more substantial." The various electives presented an opportunity for additional practical activities to broaden the experience beyond the traditional curriculum. Col Philips spoke about his instructor-led elective and said "I was exposed to a lot of different applications of technology in a lot of different arenas, so we looked at it from a very broad perspective and got hands-on with a lot of different pieces of the tech that the instructor had available."

Summary

This chapter focused on the results of my research study and the core themes and sub-themes I recognized following the data collection process. I analyzed the responses to the individual interviews, focus groups, and written prompts and I identified four primary themes with two sub-themes each. The first theme was encouraged and dedicated reflection, the second theme was learning through dialogue, the third theme focused on highlighting diverse experiences, and the fourth was applying learned concepts. All 12 participants communicated data points that were analyzed and coded in all four of the primary themes.

The sub-themes that emerged were encouraging and dedicating self-reflection, the power of metacognition, and structured reflection time. The next sub-themes that materialized were learning through dialogue, academic freedom and candid conversations, and the impact of shared experiences. The third primary theme, focusing on highlighting diverse experiences, developed the sub-themes of learning through diverse modalities and diverse military perspectives. Finally, the last sub-themes, related to the applying learned concepts primary theme, were enjoyable practical events and interactions during active experimentation. Each sub-theme had at least 10 of the 12 participants directly reference data points consistent with the sub-theme and all twelve participants made inferences to all sub-themes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenology was to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending professional military education at Air War College. I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study to examine the lived experiences of 12 Air National Guard officers who attended the Air War College resident program. In Chapter Five, I express my interpretations of the research study findings and provide my thoughts on the data. I communicate the implications of this study for policy and practice, and describe the theoretical and methodological implications. I discuss a few limitations and delimitations associated with this research study. Finally, I outline recommendations for future research that will build on this study and the current literature.

Discussion

The Air National Guard participants in this study all communicated an overall positive and valuable experience at Air War College. Lt Col Gregory said, "it is apparent here is the significant monetary and senior-leader time investment spent on improving the students professionally and personally; they're going to pour into you and make you a better person holistically, not just militarily." This section provides a summary of the thematic findings, interpretations, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Following the data collection and thematic analysis of this study's results, I identified four primary themes and eight corresponding sub-themes that emerged from the data. Specifically, two sub-themes that detail particular areas of the theme the participants highlighted

emerged from each theme. The primary themes identified were: encouraged and dedicated reflection, learning through dialogue, a focus on highlighting diverse experiences, and applying learned concepts. The participants' expressions that formed this study's themes aligned with David Kolb's experiential learning theory and highlighted the participants' perspective on experiencing an education program that resembles Kolb's learning cycle. David Kolb proposed that effective learning occurs when learners continuously navigate through a learning cycle consisting of reflection, abstract thought, applying understanding, and creating an experience (Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022). My interpretation findings were the basis of the themes and I expressed these through the lens of the themes, sub-themes, and Kolb's learning cycle.

Kolb's learning cycle model describes a cyclical learning process that builds on reflecting and conceptualizing details about an experience and applying new thoughts and concepts to a new experience (Kolb, 2015). The participants in this study detailed the significance placed on reflection and dialogue that brought about insightful and abstract thoughts. The participants illustrated practical exercises incorporated throughout the academic year that pushed them to expand beyond their previous capabilities and understanding and apply the new knowledge to an actual event or scenario. Following the exercise or event, the students would again enter the reflection and dialogue stage and continue the learning cycle as they uncover new ideas and concepts.

The sub-themes associated with the first theme were the power of metacognition and structured reflection time. A metacognitive reflection of the experience enhances learning by providing a deeper understanding of the information (Eutsler et al., 2023). The reflection process immediately follows the personal experience in Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 2015). The participants conveyed an appreciation of dedicated time to focus on reflection. Lt Col Corey said

"I did like the additional time that you could just focus on your thoughts, how AWC (Air War College) fits and relates to past experiences." The dedicated time embedded in the curriculum for reflection and an emphasis on metacognition proved to be phenomena that the participants respected about the resident program and attributed to their personal and professional growth.

Academic freedom and candid conversations, and the impact of shared experiences were the two sub-themes that developed from the second theme. Academic freedom, allowing the students to speak freely without the fear of judgment or reprisal, provided a venue at Air War College where honest dialogue and candid conversations were welcomed. The students developed relationships because of the environment and pushed through superficial interactions to a level of open discussions. Col Jones said the "storming, norming, performing thing has kind of happened, right? So as we get closer into the year, those kinds of conversations come a lot easier." This freedom to share and avenue to speak freely led to shared experiences with authentic perspectives and rich context. Engaging in candid conversations produced honest dialogue between the students, which was essential for building trust and expanding learning opportunities (Gillis, 2019).

The third theme highlighted learning through diverse modalities and diverse military perspectives as two sub-themes. Lt Col Allen noted that the seminar groups were highly diverse in specialty, demographic background, and personality. A diverse learning environment enhanced the transfer of knowledge and improved learning in higher education (Chen et al., 2022). Diversity was mentioned in every conversation during this study and the participants emphasized the diverse methods of instruction, dialogue, and practical exercises curriculum capacity. Learning was also enhanced by the diversity of personnel, skillsets, culture, and experiences. Lt Col Smith said, "we have very conservative people. We have very liberal people.

We have the bell curve of everything in between. And so being able to have those conversations again, it goes back to like you being able to diversify your thought."

Finally, enjoyable practical events and interactions during active experimentation sub-themes evolved from the last theme. Practical exercises allowed students to test their understanding and challenge their capabilities with the subject matter while developing additional data points and opportunities for reflection and conceptualization (Garcia et al., 2020). The practical exercises, which were the highlight of Air War College for some participants, ranged from in-class war planning exercises to international events with senior leaders from other nations. Lt Col Duncan said, "I was the country planner for our Regional Securities Studies trip to Africa, where we engaged with military personnel, politicians, and the embassy to discuss and provide dialogue on current regional security and national issues." The participants enjoyed the interactions during these active experimentation exercises and the different events allowed them to demonstrate their growth and build on prior experiences.

Personal Connections Enhance the Experience. The personal relationships formed and developed at Air War College were significant to the education experience. Learning to communicate with and understand the perspectives of military allies and partners enhanced the relationship and the ability to work together in the future. The discussions inside and outside the classroom and the time spent over the 10-month course with the diverse group extended the learning beyond the core curriculum. The relationships that support the learning cycle provide the catalyst for learners to draw from past experiences, think about ways to perform better in the future, and apply their thoughts to create new experiences.

It's More Than Just an Education Course. The program structure at Air War College encouraged and provided time for health and well-being. Although military organizations

promote personal fitness during a typical workday, the time and facilities are not always available. The participants described the allotted time and excellent facilities at Air War College and explained how the time spent engaging in physical activities helped them improve their learning capabilities. In addition to physical activity, Air War College provided an opportunity to spend time with family and friends. Senior leaders in the military often serve in roles that limit the amount of time away from work, but the experience at Air War College offered valuable time to engage with family or friends. The emphasis on improving overall health and wellness helped prepare the students for the learning engagements by establishing a positive environment for learning.

Prepares Senior Leaders for a Senior Level Assignment. Air War College aided in improving critical thinking and shifting toward a strategic level of planning and engagement. The experience focused on senior leader issues and the exercises, although drawn from past military engagements, centered on current national security concerns. The dialogue with peers, faculty, and speakers who are all currently in senior leader roles challenged Air War College students and pushed them to think at a level consistent with their next assignment. In addition to preparing the students for their next assignment, the professional military experience revitalized the students' careers and injected enthusiasm for the last few years of their careers. Air War College graduates returned to their organization informed from the 10-month course and excited to continue developing their relationships and leveraging what they learned.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The results of this study have the potential to extend beyond the 12 participants and the single experience of attending Air War College. The Air National Guard and other senior military leaders could implement policies or practices that incorporate aspects of the resident

education program that are beneficial to the growth and development of Air National Guard officers and all officers of all branches and components of the military. By understanding the themes from this study, Air National Guard organizations may enhance officer capabilities by implementing policies and practices that encourage candid dialogue, strategic thinking, and developing external relationships.

Implications for Policy

This study demonstrated the benefits of engaging in an extensive resident program and, unfortunately, there are limited opportunities to participate in a resident professional military education program at Air University each year. A policy mandating all Air National Guard officers to attend a residential program is not feasible due to the required investment of time and money. However, the Air National Guard can ask for additional slots to expand the maximum number of students at each residential professional military education program across the Department of Defense and incorporate more opportunities for in-person engagement during correspondence courses. In addition, the Air National Guard can seek opportunities to implement short in-person exercises and events for the correspondence professional military education programs that stimulate the experiences occurring during the resident program.

Implications for Practice

The participants highlighted academic freedom as a helpful tool to generate honest discussions and build trust in the seminar group. This concept may be beneficial to Air National Guard organizations if trained facilitators manage the conversation and ensure dialogue is positive in messaging and intention. Military organizations with candid dialogue might enhance their capabilities with the diversity of thought and an open perspective to employing new concepts. In addition to the academic freedom concept, international engagements were valuable

to the participants' growth and development during the education program. Implementing routine engagements with international partners may be beneficial as a component of the organization's officer professional development plan. The Air National Guard operates a State Partnership Program focusing on engagements with an assigned partnered nation and organizations can leverage the program to implement education and development discussions and exercises with the partnered nations.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theoretical framework that underpinned this study was David Kolb's experiential learning theory. According to the experiential learning theory, learning occurs as individuals move through a learning cycle (Kolb, 2015). Although the learners can enter the learning cycle at any point, the process involves an experience, reflecting on the experience, conceptualizing new thoughts from the reflection, and actively experimenting by applying the new ideas, which creates a unique experience and starts the cycle over (Kolb, 2015). This study aligned with the theoretical framework and the themes identified from the data collection mirrored Kolb's learning cycle concepts.

Although there is substantial literature on the outcomes of residential education programs, this study provides data on the lived experiences of individuals at a residential senior developmental education program in the military. The empirical findings of this study confirmed the previous understanding of interpersonal interactions and problem-based learning in an in-person development program. The participants in this study attested to the significance of engaging with a dynamic and diverse group while learning through extensive dialogue and problem-solving exercises. This study contributes to the field of study by introducing the

interactions and modalities of learning that occur at the Air War College and identifying

expectations for attending the 10-month resident program.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are weaknesses outside of the researcher's control that may impact the

outcomes, while delimitations are limitations the researcher places on the study to narrow the

scope of the research. The limitations of this study were the communication channels, the

participants' operations tempo, and the sample selection capability. The location of the

participants reduced the communication capabilities to virtual channels. Although I utilized

Microsoft Teams for the interviews and maintained the ability to interact with the participants, I

believe the dialogue and data collection opportunities are enhanced when interacting in person.

The second limitation was the participants' operations tempo in their current position. Nine of

the 12 participants communicated that they were in a duty position that had a high operations

tempo. This posed an issue with scheduling interviews, primarily the focus group interviews, for

which the participants' schedules needed to align. The final limitation was the sample selection

and the limited number of participants available to volunteer for the study. The Air National

Guard only receives 10 Air War College slots each year and the Air National Guard does not

always fill the spaces each year therefore, multiple academic year groups were necessary to gain

volunteers for the sample group.

The first two delimitations were necessary to narrow the scope of the participants because

the study sought to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers at Air War

College. Based on these criteria, the participants must have attended the Air War College as

members of the Air National Guard. In addition, Air War College offers a resident and

correspondence option to complete the professional military education requirement. This study

focused specifically on the resident program, so the participants must have attended the resident program.

Recommendations for Future Research

The most significant limitation of this study was the narrowed scope focusing on Air National Guard officers attending the Air War College professional military education program. The professional military education programs include two other programs for officer development and four for enlisted professional military education. Future research should include a qualitative study focusing on professional military education programs that are divergent from the Air War College program. Although all of the programs offer a resident and correspondence program, only one other program is ten months in residence. A qualitative study focusing on the lived experiences of the students attending a six-week or eight-week program will add to the current literature and understanding of professional military education programs.

In addition, researchers should conduct a quantitative study comparing and contrasting the differences between the effectiveness of the resident program and the correspondence program. Although this study did not seek to understand the correspondence programs or identify the differences between the resident and correspondence programs, the participants mentioned significant differences between the resident and correspondence programs throughout the study. A study highlighting the effectiveness of the resident and correspondence programs would enrich the current literature and provide data on the return on investment for the programs.

Conclusion

The opportunity for Air National Guard officers to attend the resident Air War College education program was limited and officer professional development might be deficient because of the inability to have more resident experiences. Although significant barriers prevent the Air

National Guard from sending all qualifying officers to Air War College, organizations can experience highlighted areas of the resident program by incorporating experiences that enhance dialogue with diverse groups, develop relationships with members in other organizations, and integrate strategic thinking exercises to prepare the senior leaders for their next assignment. The feedback from the students supported Kolb's experiential learning theoretical framework, so professional military education students should be afforded an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, conceptualize new ideas surrounding the experience, and apply the new concepts during their learning process. Future research should expand on this study by focusing on other professional military education programs and incorporating a quantitative study that compares and contrasts the differences between the resident and correspondence programs.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 16, 2023

Clayton Thompson
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-883 THE LIVED PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF AIR NATIONAL GUARD OFFICERS AT AIR UNIVERSITY: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY

Dear Clayton Thompson, David Vacchi,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any

modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: THE LIVED PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF AIR NATIONAL GUARD OFFICERS AT AIR UNIVERSITY: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY
Principal Investigator: Clayton Thompson, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a member of the Air National Guard and either a graduate or student of the Air War College in-residence program. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard officers attending the professional military education program at Air War College.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in a semi-structured interview that will take no more than 1 hour. The interview will be conducted with Microsoft TEAMS and I will record the discussion.
2. Participate in a focus group interview session that will take no more than an hour. The focus group will also be conducted on Microsoft Teams and I will record the discussion.
3. Provide a written response to writing prompt questions. The written response will need to be completed within five business days of receiving the prompt.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing an understanding of the experiences that occur at Air War College and highlighting key factors that impact professional and professional military education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses to the individual interviews and written prompts will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and his doctoral committee members will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Clayton Thompson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and/or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. David Vacchi, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Dear [Potential Participant],

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Education – Organizational Leadership. The purpose of my research is to understand the lived experiences of Air National Guard members attending the Air War College in-residence program. If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be Air National Guard members and either graduates or students of the Air War College in-residence program. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview and a focus group, and respond to a written prompt. The interview and focus group will be no longer than an hour for each, and the written prompt should be returned within five days of receiving it. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me with an email at ████████████████████ or you can call me at ██████████ to schedule an interview. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to work with you to schedule a time for an interview.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Clayton Thompson
Ph.D. Candidate