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**The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent
Children's College Experience and Independence**

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LEAD 553: Action Research Practicum II

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May 10, 2022

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Abstract

The phrase first-generation (FG) college student describes a student who is the first in their family to attend a higher education institution. This definition encompasses students from diverse backgrounds, such as military-connected students who are students with military affiliations (e.g., veteran, active duty, reservist, or dependent). Existing studies analyze the overall college experiences of FG and military-connected students, but not many studies explore the population of FG military-dependent children. The purpose of this study was to analyze the college experiences of FG military-dependent children and the impacts, if any, of receiving military education benefits. I conducted a precycle which consisted of a survey; two cycles of data collection through One-on-One interviews and a Community Building Group; and one cycle of data review. I conducted this research to address the gap in literature regarding military-connected students and assist the University of San Diego in creating a more holistic Military and Veterans Program that supports *all* students falling under the military-connected population.

Keywords: military-connected, military-dependent student, first-generation college student, military children

The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence

Being the oldest daughter in an immigrant family, the importance of receiving a college education was always emphasized. Although I spent many years looking forward to college, I did not expect how much my identity as a first-generation (FG) college student would affect my experience. As a kid, and even during part of my undergraduate education, I did not know I was even part of the FG college student population. I just knew that navigating my academic journey was not going to be easy because I did not have my parents' college experiences to learn from. I had to figure out many things on my own, whether it was applying for financial aid, scholarships, figuring out which classes I should take, finding mentors, or simply deciding what major to declare. Luckily for me, my education was the only thing on which I needed to focus on. Unlike many FG college students, I did not have to worry about the financial burden of going to college because of the military education benefits that I was receiving from my dad's military service(cite).

Due to receiving military education benefits, I needed to interact with my alma mater's military program. My interactions with California State University San Marcos' (CSUSM) Veteran and Military-Connected Services' staff was purely to certify my eligibility to use my education benefits every semester. Aside from this once-a-semester interaction, the only other interaction I had with their staff was prior to becoming a CSUSM student, I had visited the Veteran and Military-Connected Service building to inquire about using my education benefits and toured the space. During my time as a CSUSM student, I did not feel welcome in the Veteran and Military-Connected Service building and did not receive communication regarding

programming that supported military-dependent children *specifically* and/or allowed us to be in community with one another.

I understand and acknowledge that the privilege of receiving military education benefits made my college experience easier. But, because my family and I were not financially burdened, I felt I always needed to exceed my family's expectations and prove I deserved the privilege I was experiencing. I tried to prove my worth by ensuring I had high grades and working on-campus jobs. Because of my experiences as a FG college student, receiving military education benefits, and my interactions with CSUSM's Veteran and Military-Connected Service, I wanted to learn more about the experiences of other military-dependent children, specifically those that also identify as FG college students.

With this research, I hoped to learn more about the college experiences of FG military-dependent children and how receiving military education benefits have, or have not, impacted their experiences. Additionally, I hoped to help FG military-dependent students to be in community with one another and to find ways higher education institutions, such as the University of San Diego (USD), better support the military-dependent children population, in turn allowing the university's Military and Veterans Program to serve a more holistic military-connected student population.

Background and Literature Review

Prior to beginning my study, I conducted a literature review in order to learn about what studies have been conducted to learn about the college experiences of the MC student population. During this review, I paid close attention to how these studies were conducted in order to determine what approach I wanted to utilize for my own study.

First-Generation and Military-Connected Students Definition

Universally, there is not a clear definition of a FG college student, which USD recognizes, stating that USD welcomes students who self-identify as a FG college student. First-generation (FG) college students are students whose parents did not have access to any form of higher education, either a community college or 4-year university (Wurster et al., 2012). FG students have to navigate unfamiliar obstacles from transitioning to higher education from high school and their higher education journey. One of the biggest obstacles FG students must navigate through is their financial situation (Wurster et al., 2012). USD's (n.d.-b) definition of FG college students is

At the time you completed high school or high school equivalency, your custodial parent(s) or legal guardian(s) had not earned a bachelor's degree or higher. This means you are the first to attend a 4-year college/university and obtain a bachelor's degree.

I used USD's definition of an FG college student for this study.

Much like the definition for FG college students, the definition for military-connected (MC) students varies, but the definition almost always includes active-duty personnel, reservists, veterans, or members of the National Guard (Sikes et al., 2020; Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). At first glance, this definition seems good because it includes the populations that make up the military, but it completely ignores dependents—children and spouses—of military service members. Brown and Gross (2011) uses the term military student rather than military-connected, but their definition is much more inclusive: a student who is either a member of the active duty, reserve, National Guard, or retired military population, or a spouse or primary dependent of one of these students. For this study and in hopes to avoid confusion with the term military-connected (MC), student I will be using the term military-dependent (MD) children.

Soft vs. Hard Independence

Covarrubias et al. (2018) explained that FG college students are never truly independent, even after moving to college, because of their background, upbringing, and familial ties.

Covarrubias et al. (2018) studied 34 low-income Latinx and Asian American FG college students and their interdependent familial roles and how these roles affect their independence. Through semi-structured interviews about the participants' familial roles, Covarrubias et al. (2018) found four themes of *soft independence* and five themes of *hard independence*.

Soft independence is described as “an emotion-focused sense of independence wherein children were nudged to explore their feelings and to express their preferences as they developed into unique individuals,” most common with upper-and-middle class families (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p. 4). The four themes of soft independence are: (a) gaining freedom, (b) becoming self-expressive, (c) pursuing their own interests, and (d) gaining maturity. On the other hand, hard independence is most common with working-class families and is defined as “a survival focused sense of self-reliance. With a limited or nonexistent safety net in working-class neighborhoods, children were taught to be tough individuals who respected hierarchy and followed rules,” (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p. 4). The researchers found five themes of hard independence: being resilient, self-reliant, being tough, responsible, and breaking tradition.

Although soft independence is primarily a trait within upper-and-middle class families, Covarrubias et al. (2018) found that FG college students were still exposed to these behaviors because they have engaged in American contexts, meaning FG college students have been exposed to the soft independence traits via media and/or public schooling, but were not developed until the FG students transitioned to college. But with hard independence, the FG college students learned these behaviors primarily through their relationships with their families

back home and/or before transitioning to college. Covarrubias et al.'s (2018) study shows that FG college students come into college with different perspectives and have to navigate many different responsibilities. The FG college student identity alone impacts their college experience and independence, what more when they have that added identity of being a military-dependent child? I used Covarrubias et al.'s (2018) definitions of soft and hard independence to analyze the college experiences of FG MD children.

Military Educational Benefits

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 also known as the Government Issue (G.I.) Bill was created to support the veterans of World War II, allowing WWII service members an opportunity to continue their education by attending college or a vocational school; they were given a tuition stipend and a cost of living stipend (History, 2010). In 2008, Congress passed the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill which gave veterans who were active duty on and after September 11, 2001 greater education benefits and allowed those veterans to transfer benefits to their dependents (History, 2010). In 2017, the Forever G.I. Bill eliminated the 15-year limit to use the education benefits, additional funding was provided, and monthly housing allowances were distributed to students (Sikes et al., 2020). In the United States, the average tuition and fees for the 2020-2021 academic year at a public 4-year institution was \$10,980 while the average for a private 4-year institution was \$38,710, therefore, military service members and their dependents are extremely privileged to be able to attend college without having to worry about their financial situation (Kneeven & Wangman, 2022).

First-Generation and Student Veterans Experiences

FG students and student veterans most likely come from low-income backgrounds compared to their peers, (Wurster et al., 2012) and these two identities can significantly affect

one's academic journey. FG students may come into the university setting not just with the desire to learn and determination to achieve goals that were unattainable for their parents, but they also come with family responsibilities that may require them to split their time between their academics and family, such as being a caretaker and income-provider. One way FG students navigate such responsibilities is by working in order to lessen the financial burden on their parents (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Splitting their time between working and academic responsibilities may hinder FG students from truly engaging in their college setting. The more time students spend working, the less time they spend on their academics, which then affects their grades. These students also have less time for extracurricular activities, and unpaid internships, activities which are all factors that could help them with future job opportunities (Wurster et al., 2012). Additionally, FG students are less likely to be academically prepared, have less educational aspirations, and do not have adequate knowledge of the application process (Wurster et al., 2012). Due to these obstacles, many FG students turn to school administrators, teachers, and other staff for guidance, therefore, it is important for colleges to be well equipped and prepared to support these students.

“First-generation students are overrepresented among student veterans, with 66% of combat veterans who responded to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2010 reporting that they were first-generation,” (Wurster et al., 2012, p. 129). These students are facing obstacles from their FG student identity and obstacles from their military service. Finances may not be a problem for FG veteran students, they still struggle with integration to the university setting (Brown & Gross, 2011). MC students that are still serving in the military must be ready to deploy at all times, taking the MC student away from their student responsibilities and educational resources. MC students that identify as veterans have different obstacles than

their active-duty counterparts (Brown & Gross, 2011). Wurster et al.'s (2012) case study talked about Dean, a FG student veteran that was struggling with navigating higher education and familial responsibilities. Dean's FG college student identity already made it difficult for him to navigate his institution, his military background and age made it difficult to connect with peers and split his time between his academics and family duties, adding another layer of difficulty for Dean to fully engage as a student.

Although it is important to understand the college experiences of FG veteran students, it should not hinder the exploration of understanding the experiences of other populations in MC students. MD children may not have the responsibilities of a current military service member or familial duties of military veterans, but that does not mean they do not have valuable insights and experiences that the rest of the MC population cannot learn from.

Military Friendly Institutions

The results of Williams-Klotz and Gansemer-Topf's (2017) study should show that universities, especially public universities, need to do a better job at creating programs for MC students, many of these students are not your typical college aged students, therefore, creating tutoring programs specific to them would be very beneficial. Institutions that embrace and recognize the unique characteristics of the MC student community are described as military friendly. For an institution to be described as military friendly, it must adhere to the principles of best practice that is outlined by the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC):

Offering priority registration for military students, simplified or expedited application process, flexible enrollment deadlines, academic and counseling services targeted to military students, special web pages for returning military students, support groups, transfer credit policies that minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of coursework, limited academic residency requirement of 25% of undergraduate degree programs on campus and 30% for fully online programs, acceptance of ACE credit recommendations for learning experiences in the armed forces, awarding of credit for college level learning validated through testing (College Level Examination Program [CLEP], Defense Activity

for Non-Traditional Education Services [DANTES] exams, and Excelsior College Testing (ECE), deferred tuition payment plans, veterans lounges and centers, and research focus on meeting the needs of military students (Brown & Gross, 2011, p. 46).

Although this list may seem lengthy, it is important to note that many of these are to support the unique needs of MC students and to acknowledge the learning and training they have already received while serving in the military. Additionally, representation in the university should also be a focus, SOC outlines that a university should have academic counseling services targeted to military students but these individuals should also come from a military background (Brown & Gross, 2011). Universities should have faculty/staff familiar with this population's experiences and their needs to be better prepared to support this population.

Although the principles of best practice outlined by the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges seem to only directly focus on the needs of veterans and servicemembers, much of the support that they outlined can translate to MD children. Some of the things from the list that can also be used to support MD children are support groups, lounges and centers, research focusing on the needs of the population, and representation among faculty and staff.

Context

My study took place at the University of San Diego (USD), where I engaged with participants both in person and online. Currently, USD has a total of 9,041 students; 5,702 undergraduate students, 2,529 graduate, doctoral, and paralegal students, and 810 Law/JD graduate students (University of San Diego, n.d.-a). As of 2020, almost 800 MC students were enrolled in USD, half of them being undergraduate students, while 190 undergraduate students identified as FG college students (USD Media Relations, 2020; University of San Diego, n.d.-c).

During the Fall of 2020, I began my graduate program at USD and my graduate assistant (GA) position with the Military and Veterans Program (MVP). The following Fall semester, I

transitioned out of my GA position at MVP and became a GA with the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC). As the current GA for the UFMC, I observed and experienced how intentional this office is with interacting with students they serve, as well as the observations I had as a GA at MVP solidified my desire to study the FG MD children population.

I wanted to study college experiences of FG MD children and how it is impacted by military education benefits because it is something I experienced. My experiences and growth were, and still are, heavily influenced by this part of my identity and I wanted to learn about the experiences of others. Additionally, part of the desire I had to study this population is because I wanted to validate my experiences. Understandably, being part of this population, concerns of biases were present, but I believe this allowed me to better understand and connect with the FG MD children participants. This topic should be important to others and higher education institutions, specifically, because they are part of a continuously growing population. In 2012, \$10 billion of military education benefits were awarded to MC students (Williams-Klotz & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). Years later, Sikes et al. (2020) pointed out that in 2018, there were 893,725 beneficiaries that received \$11 billion in education benefits. This topic and research is important to me and should be important to others because it will allow universities to create better military programs that are better equipped to support *all* their MC students.

Project Rationale

The phrase first-generation (FG) college student is an umbrella term and under this umbrella many other identities exist, such as FG military-dependent (MD) children. When I reflected on my experiences with the Veterans Services at CSUSM and the experiences I had as a GA with the MVP, I realized that there was a lack of engagement with FG MD children and many services were catered to active duty members and veterans, understandably so. I

understand the population of active duty members and veterans have unique needs for their academic journey, but that does not mean they should be the only population in the MC student population to receive services like support and programming. Specially because both programs specifically state they are supporting the military-connected student population, with USD's MVP stating, "our program provides student-focused services to all USD military-connected students, including student veterans, active-duty, dependent children, and spouses," while CSUSM's Veterans Services states "the department of Veteran and Military-Connected Services strives to be intentional in creating co-curricular opportunities through programs, services, and physical space to cultivate and enrich the student experience for our veteran and military-connected students" (CSUSM, n.d.).

As I analyzed literature, I found plenty of research regarding the FG college student identity and their college experiences, unlike with military-dependent (MD) children. Yes, there are plenty of studies conducted to analyze the college experiences of MC students, but these studies never solely focus on the dependent children, the focus was on military service members and veterans. In fact, much of the research I saw did not always include military-dependent children in their definition of military-connected.

Participants

To connect and engage with the MC population at USD and recruit FG MD children, I needed to receive permission from the Director of MVP. Due to my previous role at MVP, the Director was aware of what I planned to do with my action research project. But to provide the Director with more information, I emailed them a *Permission and Recruitment Support Letter* (see Appendix A) that outlined the purpose of the study and the different phases for participation. From previous conversations, I knew the Director was in support of my study, but receiving the

Signed Site Permission Letter (see Appendix B) solidified that support for me. This letter essentially gave me approval to be able to engage with students within my target population.

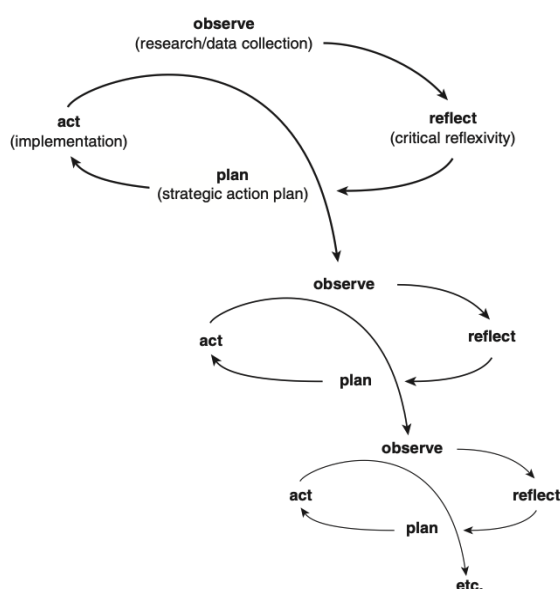
To recruit participants, I created a recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) that outlined what the participation will look like and incentives.

Research Design

The methodological approach I used for my action research project is based on O’Leary’s Cycles of Action Research (Koshy et al., 2010). O’Leary’s approach to action research consists of four parts: observe, reflect, plan, and act (see Figure 1). In the first step of the cycle, observe is researching my topic and/or collecting data. The second step, reflect is “critical reflexivity,” meaning I analyze the research I have done and/or the data I have collected. The third step is to plan; in this step I take what I have learned and begin planning my next steps, in regards to the previous step. The fourth step is act, in this step I will begin to implement my plan.

Figure 1

O’Leary’s Cycles of Research



Note: From Koshy et al. (2010). What is Action Research? *Sage Publications*.

http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/36584_01_Koshy_et_al_Ch_01.pdf

O’Leary’s action research is an “experiential learning approach, to change, where the goal is to continually refine the methods, data, and interpretation in light of the understanding developed in each earlier cycle” (Koshy et al., 2010, p. 6). This approach emphasizes the need to be flexible when going through the different cycles of one’s research and using what you have learned to improve and inform next steps. Using this lens and approach was important to me because students have lives and responsibilities outside the classroom that may affect their participation in my study.

I employed a mixed method approach for my study and used both quantitative and qualitative methods. I created a survey in Google Forms and used it as a screening tool for my participants. But, because my focus is on understanding the college experiences of FG MD children, the bulk of my data came from semi-structured One-on-One interviews. For these interviews, I created a set of questions prior to interviewing the participants. Because I am part of this population, this was a crucial step. I wanted to be intentional with how I worded my questions to try and avoid researcher bias and not lead participants to an answer. The One-on-One interviews are semi-structured because I wanted to provide myself space to be able to have follow up questions. Additionally, I understand that asking questions about one’s lived experiences can be emotionally inducing, I made sure to provide my participants with resources they can reach out to, if needed.

Data Collection

This study was made up of 1 pre-phase and 3 phases. Although I used O’Leary’s (Koshy et al., 2010) Cycles of Action Research, I used the term phase rather than cycle. I made this change with recruitment in mind; I felt that using the term cycle indicated that participants may

be required to complete multiple steps per cycle, phase seemed more straight forward. The pre-phase was an online survey that I used to screen participants that wanted to be part of my study and ensure they meet the participant requirements. Aside from the survey being a screening tool, I also asked the participants' class units per semester, on and off-campus jobs and hours, and extracurricular activities. These questions were included in the survey to help me construct any additional questions I may have for the semi-structured One-on-One interviews. The next two phases, Phase I and II, were designed to learn more about the college experiences of the participants. Phase I was a One-on-One interview designed to learn more about the participant and their college experiences. Phase II was supposed to be a Community Building Group, where the participants would have been in community with one another and learn about each other's experiences, this phase was later revised. The last phase, Phase III, was designed to review overarching themes and results and provide feedback and/or recommendations to USD's Military and Veterans Program.

The methods used to collect data in this study were both quantitative and qualitative. To analyze the online survey, the answers were collected on an Excel spreadsheet. The data I collected from direct participant interactions were either audio or video recorded, allowing me to have transcripts available to analyze. Due to this, I was able to observe themes from the participants' experiences. Additionally, I used Covarrubias et al.'s (2018) definition of soft and hard independence when analyzing the independence of the participants.

Each phase within my study is constructed in a way where they were informed by data and information collected by the previous phases, much like O'Leary's Cycles of Action Research (Koshy et al., 2010).

Phases Results and Findings

The following details each step of the pre-phase and phases that I conducted. The data I collected is broken down by each phase and their steps for easier understanding.

Pre-Phase: Online Survey

Students that are interested in participating in my study were required to complete an online survey. The following details the process I followed prior to sharing the online survey to interested students.

Observe

As I navigated my undergraduate education at CSUSM my identity as a FG MD child was really prevalent. As a FG college student, I was having to navigate this new world of higher education and having feelings that many FG college students feel. While my identity as a MD child brought on conflicting emotions about my worth.

Covarrubias et al., (2018) wrote about how the familial roles and responsibilities that FG college students hold affects their independence, even after they have moved away for college. These family roles were: (a) providing emotional support and advocacy, (b) being a language and financial broker, (c) providing financial support, (d) providing physical support, (e) sibling caregiving, and (f) giving advice; these findings really resonated with me. Throughout my undergraduate education, I found myself at times not being able to fully immerse myself with my environment due to roles and/or responsibilities I have back home that are in the back of my mind. Due to family dynamics, I am the default person when a family member needs support. I found myself providing emotional support and advocacy, being a language broker, providing physical support, sibling caregiving, and giving advice. Supporting my family in any way I can is not a problem, but it did take a toll on me, especially when I was needed during a time that I

could not be present due to my academic and/or job responsibilities. My identity as a MD child and how it made me feel about my college experience is confusing. On one hand I am very proud of this identity because of my dad's service and because of all the experiences I had as a military child, but on the other hand, I felt like a fraud. I was receiving military education benefits that I felt had nothing to do with me. I received these benefits purely due to my dad serving after the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill took into effect and he was able to transfer the benefits to me (History, 2010). These feelings made me feel the need to compensate for the privilege I was receiving.

As I was coming into my graduate program, these feelings were still very prevalent. After receiving the GA position at MVP, I thought I would be able to finally be part of the MC student community and hopefully make some peace with that side of my identity. Unfortunately, that is not what I experienced. Although my time at MVP was during the year USD was operating remotely, I was still able to observe that their programs and support they offered for the MC students were catered to the active service members and veterans, there was no support for other folks in the population, particularly the MD children. During my time at MVP, I had conversations with the former Director on how MVP could be more approachable to everyone in the MC student population. I proposed to have a social media program through MVP's Instagram that introduces the staff to the greater USD community and folks that interact with our social media, in hopes of making MVP more personable and approachable, but unfortunately, it never came to fruition. Looking at it from my MD child lens, it was very frustrating, clearly there was a gap in the support they have for MC students and my proposal to hopefully bridge that was ignored.

Reflect

Looking back at the experiences I had as an undergraduate student at CSUSM, as the former GA at MVP, and as a FG MD child, I can not help but feel frustrated with the lack of support that MD children are receiving. My experiences made me want to explore and learn about the FG MD children community and how to better support them. Although MD children are not service members, I believe they still come into higher education institutions with just as much to offer as current and past military service members. I acknowledge that part of the reason I wanted to conduct a study to learn more about this population is to validate my experiences, but at the same time, FG college students and MC students separately have valuable lived experiences that inform how they navigate higher education institutions, what more if they identify with both populations? As I was looking through literature to have an understanding of the overall college experiences of FG college students with military affiliation, I had difficulty finding studies focusing on MD children. My inability to find these studies may be due to the key words and/or databases that I was using, but I still find it incredible that I was unable to find at least one study.

The lack of support and studies made me wonder, how can programs such as MVP better support FG MD children? Not only do I want to learn more about the FG MD children population but I want to help create ways that can help create spaces for them to be in community with one another.

Plan

Prior to recruitment, I created a flyer that outlined participant requirements, layout of the study, and compensation (see Appendix C). I created an online survey as the first step to my study to use as a screening tool to determine that the students interested actually meet the

participant requirements of the study (see Appendix D). I also planned on using this survey as a guide to help me determine any additional questions I may have for the participants.

To begin my study and recruit students to participate, I reached out to the current Director of MVP to ask for permission to work with the FG MD children population and support with recruitment (see Appendix A). After receiving permission (see Appendix B). I began recruitment by posting flyers in high traffic areas around the university. As the current GA at the UFMC, I was also able to have my flyer included in the UFMC's newsletter. Due to my close relation to the rest of The Commons, which consists of the UFMC, The Black Student Resource Commons, Womens Commons, and LGBTQ+ & Allies Commons, I also sent them my recruitment flyer. The Director of MVP was very supportive and included my flyers in their newsletters.

About a week after my initial distribution, I did not receive any communication from students that were interested in participating in my study, so, I reached out to other departments on campus to reach a broader audience of students. I emailed the Directors of Student Activities and Involvement and Assistant Director for Community & Leadership Development for permission to interact with students that fall within their departments and their support with recruitment. The site permission from Student Activities and Involvement allowed me to send my recruitment flyer to different student organizations and the permission from Community & Leadership Development allowed me to send my recruitment flyer to the Commuter Commons (see Appendix E).

At this point, I had been trying to recruit participants in my study for a couple weeks and was still not receiving any emails from interested students. Because of difficulty finding participants, I emailed the Director of MVP and asked for support. On February 22nd, I emailed the Director of MVP and asked if it would be possible to receive a list of student emails that

identify as FG MD children. Unfortunately, the Director was unable to provide this information but was able to connect me with the Director of Institutional Research and Planning. The Director of Institutional Research and Planning informed me that I am not able to receive an email list of FG MD children due to differing definitions of FG college student and because it is sensitive information that may put off respondents. The Director of Institutional Research and Planning however, could give me an email list of students that are military-affiliated or MC students. After difficulty recruiting participants on my own, I was more than happy to receive any kind of support.

Act

After I connected with the Director of Institutional Research and Planning and received the email list, I changed my email approach. Initially, the emails I sent only laid out requirements and participation, but this was no longer adequate. I wanted to send an email that included the link so that students could go directly to the survey, rather than reaching out to me and stating their interest. On March 1st, I sent a mass email using Google's Yet Another Mail Merge feature to the 759 students that were on the email list I received (see Appendix F).

Phase I: One-on-One Interview

The following is an explanation of my observations from the submitted responses for the Pre-Phase online survey and how these observations informed my next steps.

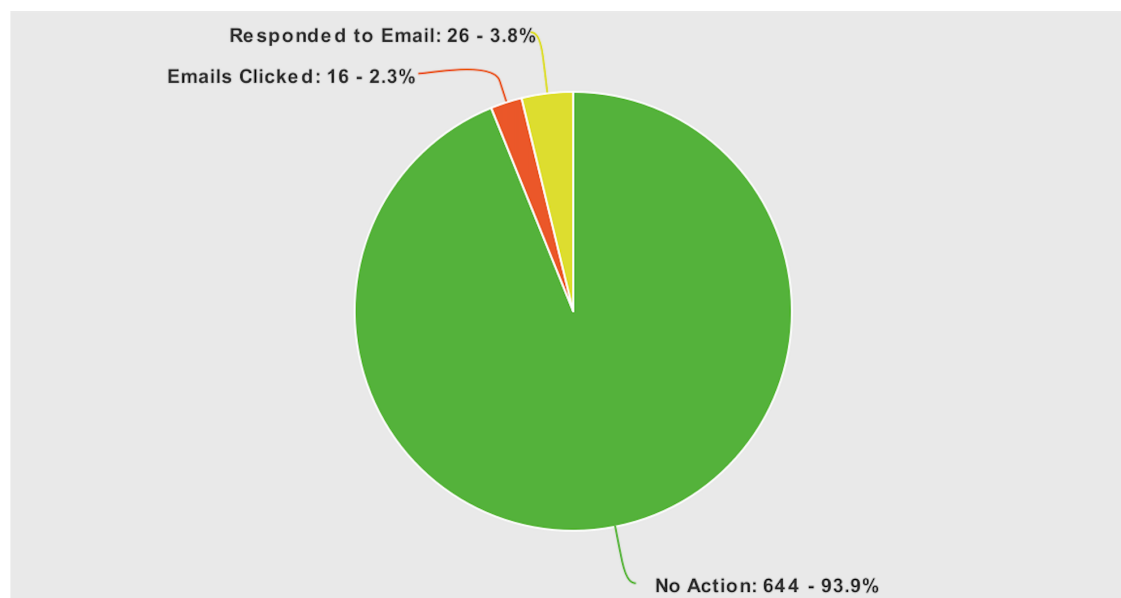
Observe

The email I sent to the list of students that identified as MC to me felt like the last push I was able to do for recruitment. By using Google's Yet Another Mail Merge, I was able to see in real time the status of the emails; whether the email was sent, opened, received, or if they responded to the email. Of the 759 emails I sent, 686 or 90% of emails were opened. Out of the

emails that were opened, 26 students or 3.8% responded to the email and 16 students or 2.3% clicked on the link in the email (see Figure 2). Of the 16 students that clicked the survey link, 12 students submitted the survey. As I monitored the survey responses, I observed many of the students were above the age range I outlined. I was also receiving emails from students who indicated their interest but were out of the age range. Because of this, I submitted a modification to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to increase my age range. Once the modification was approved, I responded to the students email letting them know the age range has been increased and if they would still like to participate, to submit the survey.

Figure 2

Military-Connected Emails Responses



Unfortunately, out of the 12 students that submitted, only two were eligible to participate in study. The ten interested students were disqualified from participating due to them not meeting all of the participant requirements: age, FG college student status, military child, and receiving military education benefits; I sent these students an email explaining the decision (see Appendix G).

Although I was only able to recruit two students to participate in the study, this was a lot of progress compared to my previous attempts. At this point in the semester, I went ahead and began scheduling the next phase of my study, which was the One-on-One interviews with the two participants I had.

After about 2 weeks, during an informational interview with a campus partner, I had shared my action research project and expressed my hardships in finding participants. This campus partner had informed me they may know students that fit my participant requirements and that they will reach out to those students in hopes of finding at least one more participant for my study. Through this connection, I was able to find my third participant (see Table 1). This participant submitted the survey and met all the participant requirements.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Classification	Race	Age	Job Status	# of Orgs
Participant A	2nd Yr/Undergrad	Hispanic/ Latinx	21	Off-campus 40 hrs/wk	N/A
Participant B	2nd Yr/Grad	Asian/ Pacific Islander	24	On-campus 7 hrs/wk	3
Participant C	2nd Yr/Undergrad	Asian/ Pacific Islander	19	On-campus 8 hrs/wk	7

Besides using the survey as a screening tool to determine participation eligibility, I also learned some things about my participants. Aside from being full time students, the participants all listed they either had an on or off-campus job or participated in extracurricular activities, whether that was through student organizations on campus and/or community organizations. I used this information to create additional questions for the One-on-One interviews. Creating

these additional questions was a way for me to get to know the participant better and to make the interviews more personalized to the student.

Reflect

The recruitment process was a lot more difficult than I thought it was going to be. Although the participants I was looking for came from a very specific population, I thought it would be manageable and not difficult to find participants, but that was not the case. Looking back on my recruitment efforts, it should have been more intentional. My recruitment flyer had all the information that students needed to know about participant requirements and what participation looked like, but only having my email and having students reach out to me was ineffective. For easy access and efficiency, I should have added the URL or QR code of the online survey on the flyer. I also should have reached out to the Director of MVP right away when I realized that my recruitment efforts were lacking.

When I sent the recruitment email to students in the MC email list, I received a lot of responses regarding the age requirement. I originally had the age range from 18 to 23 years old because in the military, if a military child is a full time student until the age of 23, they still receive full benefits (Important Information You Should Know About Adult Children's Benefits, n.d.). Due to the responses, I decided to make my age range double so it became 18 to 28 years old (see Appendix H).

My recruitment journey made me realize the importance of connections and relationships. I believe that the reason Participant C decided to participate is because of the connection and relationship they had with the campus partner that reached out to them. I believe this because Participant C was one of the students that was in the MC list and had opened the email but did not respond and/or clicked the online survey link.

Plan

After reviewing data from the online survey, I began to prepare for the next phase of my study, which was the One-on-One interviews. I began to email the students that met the participant requirements to set up One-on-One interviews, either via Zoom or in person (see Appendix I). Although I had questions already outlined for the One-on-One interviews (see Appendix J), I used the information the students included in the survey to create additional questions to ask them. These questions were catered depending on their job hours and the extracurricular activities they participated in. This is one of the reasons why I decided to have semi-structured One-on-One interviews, I wanted to incorporate personalized questions.

When the students responded, confirming the time and date of the One-on-One interview, I reserved a room for the interview so that our conversation could be private. I also sent the participants the Informed Consent Form so that they can review it prior to the interview (see Appendix K). The language on this Informed Consent Form was also incorporated in the online survey they submitted during the Pre-Phase.

Act

After reviewing the informed consent form with the participants, I began to ask the interview questions. I conducted two in-person interviews and one interview via Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted about 30 minutes.

On March 9th, I conducted my first One-on-One interview with Participant A. Participant A is a 21year old, second-year undergraduate student navigating a full time job while being a full time student. Participant A shared their experiences with having to pivot with their education due to COVID-19 and the restrictions of the military education benefits they receive. Participant A also shared their feelings towards their military education benefits and how it is benefiting them.

On March 16th, I conducted my second One-on-One interview with Participant B. Participant B is a 24 year old, second-year graduate student, who holds a Teaching Assistant position and is part of other organizations on campus. Participant B shared their experiences with receiving military education benefits as an undergraduate and graduate student. Participant B had a unique experience compared to the other participants because they did not use the military education benefits throughout their undergraduate education, only using it for one year, and now using it as a graduate student. Because of this, Participant B was able to share their insights and experiences of navigating higher education institutions with and without these benefits.

On March 31st, I conducted my third and last One-on-One interview with Participant C through Zoom. Participant C is a 21 year old, second-year undergraduate student. Aside from holding an on campus job, they are part of many different organizations on campus. During our One-on-One interview, Participant C talked about their family dynamics and how their father's military service inspired them to want to join the military. The military education benefits Participant C receives is not directly through their father's military service, but rather through an ROTC scholarship that they applied for.

Phase II: Community Building Group

The following details the themes I observed from the One-on-One interviews with the three participants. I also explained my thought process for my next phase, the Community Building Group.

Observe

Having semi-structured interviews was very beneficial. Having those set interview questions allowed me to stay within the parameters of my study but also gave me the freedom to have follow-up and ask personalized questions regarding what was shared in the online survey

and throughout the interview. The overall themes that emerged were: less financial and mental stress, effects of parents' military service, belonging and community, and self-reliance.

Less Financial and Mental Stress. When I asked the participants about how receiving military education benefits impact their college experience the participants expressed how important these benefits are, in terms of being able to get an education. Participant A sharing, "I feel like if I didn't receive benefits, I wouldn't be able to go to college." Later in the interview, Participant A shared that when they found out they were accepted into USD, their dad did a sigh of relief, "I'm not going to have any student debt because the military is going to take care of it."

Participant C shared similar sentiments, "I applied for the ROTC scholarship, to where it could actually pay for my university education, and I would not be here right now without that...it's helped me out a lot." Participant A and C are essentially stating that without these education benefits, college may not have been an option for them.

Receiving these education benefits do relieve these students from the financial burden that many FG college students face. Participant A, although has an off-campus job that requires them to work at least 40 hours a week, feels that they are able to say no to work hours being offered to them when it is not compatible with their school schedule. They are able to do this because they are working to have extra income, and not necessarily because they need the money. Participant A states "I'm a manager and like all managers need to have 40 hours, but I told them like, "school comes first, so if you can't give me the 40 hours because of school, it's fine I don't need it, you can give it to someone else." Because Participant B has experienced what it is like navigating college with and without receiving military education benefits, they shared that as a graduate student receiving these benefits "takes a lot of stress off, I don't have to take out loans to survive. I'm on Chapter 35, and yeah, it just helps in that part there's less financial

stress.” Participant B also shared that during the time in his undergraduate education when he did not receive military education benefits, he was juggling multiple jobs in order to have money, but now, receiving these benefits as a graduate student, he does not feel the need to have multiple jobs and feel more comfortable taking on unpaid opportunities without it causing unneeded additional mental stress, he is at ease knowing that his finances are covered. Due to Participant B’s undergraduate and graduate experience, he recognized that receiving these benefits come with more privileges than just financial benefit. Participant C also shared that he understands he is in a fortunate circumstance, sharing that “I don’t have to deal with a lot of stresses and a lot of the, I guess, inequalities of receiving higher education. So there’s a lot of privilege associated with that.”

Not only does receiving military education benefits relieve the participants with less financial stress in the present, but as well as in future situations. Participant A shared she saves the housing allowance that comes with her military education benefits, in the event that she is no longer able to live with her family, she will have finances that can cover for living expenses and/or money for school. Participant B also shared that he also saves money leftover from their military education benefits for the summer, when he does not receive other financial aid, stating “with my mental health, it’s nice to know that I don’t have to stress about rent for next month.”

Effects of Parents’ Military Service. A theme that emerged with the participants' answers when asked about their feelings towards receiving military education benefits is *appreciation for their parent’s military service*. From what the participants shared, all three participants' fathers were the ones that joined the military and that is one of the reasons why their families are better off.

Participant A describe their childhood of having to move to different cities and states, therefore not having a “set” school, although this was Participant A’s experience she stated “I understood that it was for us to get help, and I appreciate that because I wouldn’t be able to go to college if I didn’t have benefits”

Participant B shared “It’s kind of nice to know, like it’s nice that I can realize something that my dad, my dad was in for 23 years, so it’s nice to be able to benefit from that. And it gives me a sense of pride, like that “oh my dad was doing this and now I can benefit off of it.”

Similarly, Participant C shared that the reason they applied for an ROTC scholarship was because they wanted to “pursue a college degree and become an officer in the military,” further explaining that “we [Participant C and his sibling] find inspiration from his [father] story and willingness to serve our country.”

The theme of *belonging* and *community* emerged throughout my interviews with the participants. Participants B and C’s college experiences have been impacted by their connection with the military, and not necessarily with the benefits they receive.

An additional question I asked Participant B was regarding their experiences with MVP and with their undergraduate university’s military program. Participant B shared that he did not engage with his previous university’s military program because that program “was designed for people coming out of service and going into college or transfer students,” Participant B then shared that although he does not engage with MVP, he had *some* kind of interactions with the Law School’s military bar association, explaining “I don’t interact with them too much. Just cuz I think of myself as a little more feminine, and they’re very macho, and I’m like “okay we just don’t match.”

Participant B's story makes me believe that although he wants to have a relationship with the university's military bar association it is something he does not want to pursue because he may not belong in the space. Although this on-campus association is not *in* the military, it shows how much of an impact the culture of the military has. Students on a college campus should all feel like they belong in the spaces they enter.

Participant C on the other hand expressed how his father's service has affected him in regard to connecting with other students, explaining that

It's not much of a life that people can relate to, of you know, when I do try to talk about these things about my father going through certain experiences, some people don't really understand because they haven't really directly related to those experiences

further explaining his dad's role in the military: "He was a combat medic, when I want to bring up the story, I just don't think people understand the weight of that burden associated with that story." Participant C stated that he has had a difficult time sharing that with others but it is something that he often thinks about, even when he was at a young age.

Participant B and C's stories really make a case for the need of this population to have their own space to be in community with one another and being intentional with the kind of space that is created. Additionally, it proves that FG MD children have unique experiences and outlooks that past and present service members may not have.

Family Dynamics: Effects on Independence. As students transition to college, there is an expectation from their university that students have a lot more independence from their family, which is not always the case for FG college students, Covarrubias et al. (2018) states that the roles they play in their families have an impact on their independence.

Based on Covarrubias et al.'s (2018) definitions of soft and hard independence, I observed two types of hard independence from the participants. Hard independence is "a survival

focused sense of self-reliance. With a limited or nonexistent safety net in working-class neighborhoods, children were taught to be tough individuals who respected hierarchy and followed rules.” (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p.4). The hard independence characteristic I observed from my participants was being self-reliant, which I believe ties into certain family roles they may hold, such as providing financial support to their family, even if it is not blatantly asked of them to, and is a theme with working class families.

With Participant A and C, self-reliance is experienced through being financially independent from their parents. Throughout Participant A’s interview, she shared that she navigates a full time job off-campus while being a full time student to be able to have extra income, even though she is receiving adequate military education benefits. She shared that the paychecks she receives from her job is used towards her day to day expenses while the housing allowance is put towards savings. Participant A also shared that “Once in a while, I understand that my parents struggle financially, so once in a while I pitch in to help them out. They tell me I don’t have to do it, but I just want to do that for them.” Further stating that since childhood, Participant A’s parents have always tried to give her and her siblings everything they wanted and Participant A now realizes that was “a struggle for them,” Participant A states “I want to give that back to them.” Participant C, expressed that although he has many responsibilities due to the ROTC scholarship that the military awarded him, he feels “self-dependent” because he does not have to rely on his parents, during the interview I observed Participant C was at their on-campus job.

With Participant B, self-reliance is manifested through his navigation of his higher education journey. Participant B shared that because he is a FG college student his transition to a higher education institution “was really rough because no one knew how to direct me.”

Participant B then shared that he had to figure out how to apply for certain things, such as FAFSA, or financial aid, and how he can access his military education benefits. Participant B further proves his self-reliance by taking on on-campus positions while navigating a full time graduate course load. Participant B then shared that he has a desire to “pay back” his dad because his dad joined the military in order to provide for him and his siblings.

Overall, the participants were less dependent on their families, especially in terms of finances due to the military education benefits they receive.

Reflect

After conducting the One-on-One interviews, I realized that the three participants had similar backgrounds in that their dad’s decided to enlist in the military to provide for their families. Additionally, the participants had similar sentiments towards their experiences and feelings regarding their military education benefits, such as feelings of pride and appreciation due to their dad’s service and what their dad is able to provide for them. The sense of giving back to their families, or their dad, was also really prevalent, I think this is common in the FG college student population.

The feelings of *belonging and craving community* was also prevalent. Hearing the ways receiving military education benefits have impacted and continue to impact the participants' lives validated some of mine. Participant B’s comment about how he holds back from fully participating and engaging in an on-campus organization due to the identities within that organization just proves there is a need to create a space for this population where FG MD children can freely engage with one another. Participant C’s comment about not being able to share how his dad’s military service has impacted him due to peers not understanding the gravity of their dad’s service and its impacts further solidified my desire to help create a space for the FG

MD children population to be in community with one another. FG MD children enter spaces, like universities, with so much lived and valuable experiences, there should be a space available for them to be able to share, express, and process these things. Lastly, Participant C made a comment as I was closing our interview; they thanked me for wanting to hear the stories of FG MD children.

Plan

Due to the similar sentiments that my participants have towards their college experiences and feelings with receiving military education benefits, I wanted to create a space for them to hear and witness one another. I wanted to give them an opportunity to interact with students in the FG MD children population at our university and hopefully help foster a way for them to be in communication with one another. Because I wanted my participants to hear about each other's experiences with receiving military education benefits, I chose to keep the same line of questions from the One-on-One interviews, but also adding in a question regarding any thoughts, insights, and or feedback they have towards USD's MVP.

To maximize the time with participants during the Community Building Group, I created an agenda that laid out what this phase looked like and a breakdown of the times allotted for each segment (see Appendix L). I included the *An Invitation to A Brave Space* poem (see Figure 3) and community guidelines because I acknowledge that asking students to share about their lived experiences in a group setting with students they do not know may be uncomfortable.

Figure 3

An Invitation to A Brave Space

AN INVITATION TO A BRAVE SPACE

Together we will create *brave* space
 Because there is no such thing as a “safe space” —
 We exist in the real world
 We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
 In this space
 We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world.
 We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
 We call each other to more truth and love
 We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
 We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
 We will not be perfect.
 It will not always be what we wish it to be
 But
 It will be *our brave space together*,
And
We will work on it side by side.

by Micky Scottbey Jones

I emailed the participants to submit their availability for Phase II: Community Building Group through a Doodle form so that I can schedule a time for all of us to meet. According to the participants availability, the Community Building Group was scheduled for Wednesday, April 20th at 8 to 9 pm.

Act

On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 20th, I emailed my participants to remind them of the Community Building Group that evening and let them know that I will be providing dinner. I figured that incorporating food can make the atmosphere more relaxed and encourage the participants to engage with one another before diving into the activity and questions.

On the evening of Wednesday, April 20th, I began to prepare the room that the Community Building Group was supposed to take place in. Unfortunately, the evening did not go as planned. At 8:00 pm, I received an email from Participant A informing me that she is unable to attend due to her flight back to San Diego being delayed. I did not hear from the other participants; I was later informed by a Participant C that he was unable to attend the Community Building Group due to being sick.

Due to not being able to have the Community Building Group, the semester coming to an end, and finals approaching, I decided that being in community with the participants may no longer be feasible. Although my desire was to provide space for my participants to be in community with another, I had to pivot and change my strategy. This was not something I expected and was unsure of how to proceed. I connected with my professor for possible solutions. We discussed that because one of my goals was to find ways to support the FG MD children at our university through MVP, I should email the participants my closing question I intended to ask during the Community Building Group (see Appendix M). Rather than conducting a Community Building Group for my Phase II, I pivoted and created a Post-Research Question.

Phase III: Data Review Session

The following section explains the outcome of the revised Community Building Group. I explain how the revision of Phase II influenced my plan for conducting Phase III.

Observe

After I received the participants' answers to the post-research question, I began to analyze them and found an overarching theme: *the need for community* (see Table 2). This is similar to my findings from the One-on-One interviews.

Participant A shared that MVP should reach out to students in the FG MD children population and reiterate that MVP is available to support students with any questions they may have. Participant A further stated that by doing this MVP can gain trust with the students.

Participant B shared that “it’s important for all first-gen students to have some kind of community,” in order to learn more about this identity and how it affects their lives.

Participant C shared that MVP should have events targeting FG MD children in order to meet other students in the community and create friendships.

Table 2

Post-Research Question and Answer

Participant	Answer
Participant A	I think if USD’s Military and Veterans Program can reach out to the students and let them know that if they have any questions, they could always count on them for answers. I believe having that trust that they can gain with the students is great because then the students will feel like they have their support.
Participant B	Reflecting on this question, I think it's important for all first-gen students to have some kind of community. I really liked the idea of a community building session, although I feel it may have been more feasible earlier in the semester. I believe it's important to build community as First-Gen students often do not know much about that identity and how it's affected their day to day lives. Things such as a first-generation scholarship or a specific space for first-gen folks (beyond the first-gen dialogues that currently go on) may be just as important as well moving forward.
Participant C	In response to your question, it would be nice to include events that help specifically introduce my counterparts to one another. I feel it would make things easier to find friends to whom they can relate.

Reflect

Once I identified that there is a need for a community for the FG MD children population at USD, I began to think of next steps and how the voices of my participants can be heard. Originally, I wanted to conduct my third phase, the Data Review Session, with my participants. I wanted to have them be a part of creating something I can propose to the Director of MVP so that *all* students in the MC population can be heard and supported. Unfortunately, due to timing and the outcome of the previous phase, I decided that organizing a time for my participants and I to come together would not be possible.

Because I was able to collect my participants' recommendations through email, I decided to gather all the overarching themes with the interviews, the answers from the post-research question to create a set of recommendations to share with the Director of MVP.

After reflecting on my whole action research project, from the day I began recruitment to when I had to pivot my next steps, I began to think of how my experience conducting a study with the FG MD children on campus would have been different if there was already an established community with this group or even if the Director had relationships or rapport with some of the students in the FG MD children population. As I made the decision to connect with the Director of MVP, I found myself being nervous that my findings and insights will not be heard due to past experience with the previous Director of MVP ignoring a suggestion I had. I hoped that because the Director of MVP and I have had a chance to create a relationship and rapport with another that he will be receptive to my insights.

Plan

I reached out to the Director of MVP and asked if he would be willing and interested to speak with me regarding the results of my action research study and the feedback and

recommendations from my participants. Luckily, the Director of MVP agreed to have a Zoom meeting.

To prepare for this Zoom meeting, I created a PowerPoint that had a breakdown of the different phases of my study and the overall themes I found during my data collection phases. Using the themes I found during the data collection and answers from the post-research question, I created a list of needs of the FG MD children population and used my participants recommendations as a baseline on how MVP can help foster a way for this population to be in community with one another and better support them.

Act

On Wednesday, April 27th, I conducted my third phase, the Data Review Session, with the Director of MVP, through Zoom. During this session, I shared with the Director of MVP my recruitment process, which included emailing different on-campus offices and student organizations and distributing printed flyers at high traffic areas of the university. I also shared that I was able to recruit two students from the MC list that the Director of Institutional Research and Planning provided and one student through a personal connection and that this student was also part of the MC list, but did not show interest until a mutual connection introduced us to one another. I then provided the questions I asked the participants and quotes from each student answering the questions and showcasing the overall theme of my findings. Last, I provided the Director with recommendations that I think will allow MVP to reach and meet the needs of the students in the FG MD children population and my feedback regarding the recent *MC Student Survey* that was sent out for a potentially new Military-Connected Center of Excellence (MCCE). I mentioned that by asking students for feedback regarding the space and what changes they

would like to see from MVP is a good starting point to implement changes to make the program more inclusive.

After I presented the findings and recommendations from my study, the Director of MVP agreed with my observations of needing to create a sense of community among the FG MD children population and that MVP needs to create progress with being inclusive in who they are serving. The Director of MVP then asked for my feedback regarding creating a dialogue series aimed at the FG college students in the MC population and invited me to share my findings with colleagues that focus on supporting FG students at USD and the MCCE Committee.

Limitations

I experienced several limitations throughout my study. I started my graduate program Fall of 2020, during this time the university was only offering virtual classes due to COVID-19, therefore I completed my first year of graduate school virtually, which was not what was originally communicated to us. Although I experienced virtual classes during my last semester at CSUSM during Spring of 2020, I still had to learn how to navigate the demands of graduate school in a virtual environment. As I reflect on my first semester as a graduate student, the Fall 2020 semester was one of adjustment. I was adjusting on how to navigate graduate level classes and my position as a GA at MVP.

During the Spring of 2021, I started my action research journey. Starting this project was very daunting, I had never created a research project that involved students outside of my classes. Additionally, the effects of COVID-19 began to affect me. At this time, I was in my third semester of virtual classes. I began to feel burnt out and lacked motivation to fully engage in my classes. At times, it felt that virtual classes were much more of a hassle rather than an opportunity to learn.

In the Fall of 2021, USD allowed students to return to campus for in-person classes. I thought this change would reverse my burn out and give me the motivation to push through and complete my action research project, unfortunately, that was not really the case. As I began to prepare to submit my research proposal to the IRB, there were different directions that were being told to students, there was no clear instruction on how to submit proposals and what information was needed. As a student, it seemed that the feedback you received from IRB was at the discretion of the reviewer, rather than the reviewer following clear guidelines; to me, the process was not transparent and hard to understand, which is unfortunate because this process should be easily comprehensible for students.

When I submitted my proposal, I was told that my study was exempt; meaning I was able to begin recruitment. My research proposal was exempt in November, but due to the holidays and winter break so close to when I received my exemption, I made the decision of not recruiting until students returned to campus from their winter break. Looking back, this was a bad decision. My recruitment was pushed back to February 2022.

When I began my recruitment, I struggled with lack of student engagement. The lack of student engagement early on in my study was disheartening and did not provide me with the motivation to want to continue my study. Its' manifestation during my Phase II was also an obstacle I thought would hinder me from completing my study. Although there were students that personally expressed their desire to be part of my study, they did not participate. There were also students that submitted the online survey during the Pre-Phase and never responded to follow up emails for the One-on-One interviews. Although I was not able to meet one of my goals of helping create a space for the FG MD children on campus, I was still able to engage with them to have sufficient data to create recommendations for the Director of MVP.

Recommendations

Throughout my action research project, I observed repeating themes. But the major findings of this study is the positive impact of receiving military education benefits on FG MD children's stress levels and that the FG MD children population on our campus needs a space where they can be in community with one another.

My participants shared that because of the military education benefits they receive they are not financially burdened by the expenses of receiving a college education and that they are using these benefits beyond their college expenses, such as saving what they receive for future endeavors, such as summer classes and/or graduate programs. This implies that the military education benefits FG MD children receive as they attend college sets them up to be financially dependent, even beyond their college journey. Another implication is that there is an excess of money that FG MD children receive, hopefully allowing them to finish their college education without debt and allowing them to use the funds for other needs outside of their education. Additionally, receiving military education benefits allows FG MD children to fully immerse themselves with activities they find fulfilling, whether those activities are university affiliated or not.

The last major finding is that there is a need for community among the FG MD children population. MVP lives up to their name, in that the programs and services they provide are catered to current and past military service members. There is a lack of support and presence MVP has within the FG MD children population. Not only is there a need for a community in this population, but there is also a need to be inclusive. Inclusivity for MVP can be creating programming and events outside of MVP's physical space and/or having student ambassadors that are not only male identifying; having a diverse group of student ambassadors will not only

prove that MVP is working on becoming inclusive, but it can also help them with engaging with more students.

Due to my findings, my recommendations for MVP is to have more intentionality with the programs and events they have and having a more diverse group of student ambassadors.

Creating more intentional programs and events targeting the FG MD children population at USD is important because this can be one way MVP can begin to create a space for this population to engage with others in the FG MD children community and the overall MC population. By creating programs and events that are catered to FG MD children, this population will be more likely to engage with MVP. Additionally, creating intentional programming and events means understanding their audience. MVP is going to have to change tactics when engaging with different subpopulations of the MC student population. This may mean their social media presence is going to have to be more personable and engaging. Rather than only posting event flyers, MVP can utilize the Story feature to create engagement with their social media followers, such as introducing student ambassadors, staff, and day-to-day activities. Another part of being intentional with events is where the events take place. If FG MD children do not engage with MVP, it can be due to MVP's location, it is crucial for MVP to go out into the community and host events outside of their office. By doing this, they are able to engage with a new and broader audience.

My recommendation of having more representation with the MVP student ambassadors is important if they truly want to be inclusive. The military's culture is known for being "alpha-male," this culture should not be present on a college campus where one of the goals is to create a "sense of belonging" for students. MVP student ambassadors must have a diverse group or student ambassadors, such as having student ambassadors be Students of Color, spouses,

and/or MD children. Having a diverse staff is inviting to students; students in the MC student population may hold the same identities as the student ambassadors and may feel more comfortable being in the space and/or engaging with them.

Conclusion

As a first-generation college student, being able to conduct this study has been rewarding, despite the hardships. Not only was I able to reflect more on my own experiences, learn more about this population and how they can be better supported, but I was also able to present my findings to the Director of MVP. The Director of MVP has also given me the opportunity to present my findings to different committees at the university that can help support the FG MD children population. As a first-generation college student conducting this research and being able to see what impacts it could have at the university, is rewarding. As a future higher education professional, it is important to make sure that all student voices are heard and uplifted and that we make intentional efforts to support *all* students.

Reflecting on my overall action research journey, if there is one thing I learned, it is that being in a higher education institution requires you to be resilient. There are going to be obstacles in your way, whether that is unclear guidelines from administration, lack of student engagement, or just plain burn out, you must be able to navigate that and meet your goals. But, it is also important to acknowledge that goals change, therefore journeys change as well, and you must allow yourself to mourn what was and rejoice in what can be.

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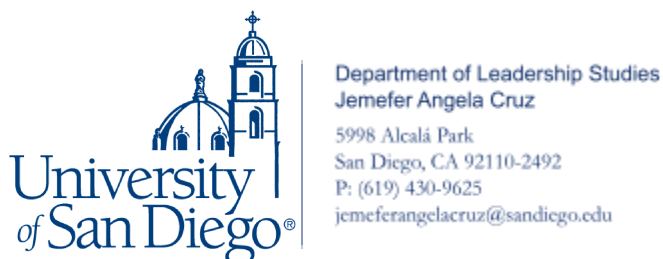
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Appendix A

Request for Permission and Recruitment Support Letter



October 28, 2021

Nelson Chase, Director
Military & Veterans Program

Dear Mr. Chase:

My name is Jemefer Angela Cruz and I am currently a second-year graduate student at the University of San Diego earning a M.A. degree in Higher Education Leadership. As a part of my graduation requirement, I am conducting an Action Research studying The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence. The purpose of this letter is to ask permission to work with First-Generation Military-Dependent Children at the University of San Diego and request assistance with participant outreach.

In my study, I will use the following process to engage my participants:

Phases in Study	Activity	Time Commitment
Pre-Phase	Online Survey; This survey will ask you about demographic questions and if you are a first-generation college student and receive military education benefits.	15 minutes
Phase I	One-on-One Interview; This interview will either be via Zoom or in-person. This will be about your experience as a student that receives military education benefits	30 – 45 minutes

Phase II	Community Building Group; This will include a community building activity that will focus on the group's experience as students receiving military education benefits	45 – 60 minutes
Phase III	Data Review Session; Participating in this discussion will be about the overall results of the study and feedback.	45 minutes

I would greatly appreciate your permission to engage First-Generation Military-Dependent Children. If my request to conduct research with First-Generation Military-Dependent Children] is acceptable, please confirm with a letter of permission with your signature and date on letterhead via email to: jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu. Please note that this letter is required for the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Diego.

If you would like further clarification prior to approving this request, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at: (619) 430-9625 or via email: jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Kecia C. Brown at keciabrown@sandiego.edu for more information about our Action Research requirements.

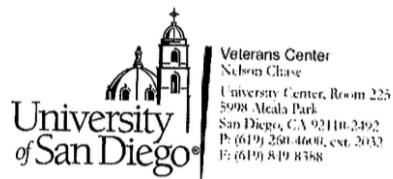
Thank you so much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jemefer Angela Cruz

Appendix B

Signed Site Permission Letter



November 1, 2021

In my capacity as Director of the Military and Veteran Programs at the University of San Diego, I support the research project titled "The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence." I am prepared to support your research endeavors, which includes giving permission to recruit participants and outreach through the Military and Veterans Program at the University of San Diego. I also understand that this research will be carried out following ethical principles and that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary and provides confidentiality of research data.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nelson Chase", is written over a horizontal line.

Nelson Chase
NELSON CHASE, MA '12
Director, Military and Veterans Program

University of San Diego | Military and Veterans Program
Hahn University Center | Room 225
5998 Alcalá Park | San Diego, CA 92110
T: 619-260-4600 x 2032
military@san-diego.edu |

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

**volunteers
needed for study on your
college experience**

Are you:



- ✓ A First-Generation College Student?
- ✓ Receiving
military education benefits?
- ✓ Between 18 to 23 years old?

This voluntary study includes:

- 15 minutes online survey
- 30 - 45 minutes interview (in-person or via Zoom)
- 45 - 60 minutes Community Building Group (in person)
- 45 minutes Data Review Session (in person)

Location: 5998 Alcala Park Way, San Diego, CA

For more information contact:
Jemefer Angela Cruz at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu
Participants will receive a \$10 Target gift card

Appendix D

Online Survey

Note: The participants will be asked to answer the following questions in the Pre-Phase, which is the Online Survey. This Online Survey was created through Google Forms. To access this form, please use the following link: <https://forms.gle/ucJyLJcudpMGBba9A>
The red asterisk (*) indicates the questions that require answers.

The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence

Hello,

My name is Jemefer Angela Cruz. I am a student in the Master of Arts Higher Education Leadership Program at the University of San Diego, San Diego, CA. I am conducting a research study about the college experiences of First-Generation Military-Dependent children and how their experiences and independence are impacted by their military education benefits and I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of this study is to find out what your experience has been receiving military education benefits.

Please review the following prior to completing this 15 minute voluntary survey:

- This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life.
- Your responses will be confidential and all your information will be coded with a number.
- Your email or IP address will be deleted, and nobody will know your identity.
- I will keep the study data for a minimum of 5 years.
- If you participate in the study, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Target that I will provide via e-mail.
- You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire study without penalty.
- Taking part in this study is optional. Choosing not to participate will have no effect on your employment status, grades, or any other benefits to which you are entitled.
- You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any specific questions.
- Contact information:

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu. You can also contact Dr. Kecia Brown at keciabrown@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.
Jemefer Angela Cruz

*If you would like a copy of this document please email me at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu.

If you decide to continue with the study, the table below outlines the next phases, the activity in each phase, and their commitment.

Phases in Study	Activity	Time Commitment
Pre-Phase	Online Survey - Completed	15 minutes
Phase I	One-on-One Interview; This will be about your experience as a student that receives military education benefits	30 – 45 minutes
Phase II	Community Building Group; This will include a community building activity that will focus on the group's experience as students receiving military education benefits	45 – 60 minutes
Phase III	Data Review Session; Participating in this discussion will be about the overall results of the study and feedback.	45 minutes

***Please type your full name if you consent.**

***Date**

Zoom Video Recording

Please read the following if you would like to participate in the Phase I: One-on-One Interview via Zoom:

- The session will be video recorded.
- The video recording of this session will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis.
- The video recording will not be shared and will be deleted once the study has been completed.

- In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to sign or NOT sign the statement below.

I hereby give permission to the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used only for data collection purposes. I understand that this Zoom video recording will not be publicly released or shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

* If you would like a copy of this document please email me at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu.

***If you would like to participate in the One-on-One interview via Zoom, please type your full name.**

***Please provide your preferred email address so that I am able to contact you regarding this study.**

Demographic Questions

Please note that your answers to the following questions will not affect you proceeding to the next part of the study. The answers to these questions will only be used to describe the makeup of the participants of this study.

Age

To which gender identity do you identify with the most?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other:

Which of the following best describes you? Please select one answer.

- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Native American or Alaskan Native
- White or Caucasian
- Multiracial or Biracial
- Other:

Do you have an off campus job?

- Yes
- No

Do you have an on campus job?

- Yes
- No

If you have a job (on or off-campus), please include about how many hours you work a week.

First-Generation College Student Definition

The University of San Diego defines First-Generation College Student as "At the time you completed high school or high school equivalency, your custodial parent(s) or legal guardian(s) had not earned a bachelor's degree or higher." This basically means that you are the first person in your family to go to a 4-year college or university and receive a bachelor's degree.

For more information, visit USD's "First-Generation College Student Experience" website:
<https://www.sandiego.edu/first-gen/>

Are you a first-generation college student?

- Yes
- No

Year(s) in college

- First-Year
- Second-Year
- Third-Year
- Fourth-Year
- Fifth-Year
- Other:

How many units do you take per semester?

Are you a military child?

- Yes
- No

Are you receiving military education benefits?

- Yes
- No

Do you have any extracurricular activities? (ex: student organizations, sports, etc)

Next Steps

***If you would like to proceed with the study, please provide your availability for a 30 to 45 minutes One-on-One interview.**

***How would you like to participate in the One-on-One interview?**

- Via Zoom
- In-Person

***Do you have any food allergies or dietary restrictions you would want me to keep in mind? If none, please type N/A.**

Appendix E

Email Recruitment



Department of Leadership Studies
Jemefer Angela Cruz
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492
P: (619) 430-9625
jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu

Hello!

I hope you are doing well!

My name is Jemefer and I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts Higher Education Leadership program. I am currently starting on my Action Research project, which is one of the graduate requirements for the program.

Through my Action Research project, I hope to understand the college experiences of first-generation military-dependent children and how it is, or is not, impacted by receiving military education benefits. **I am emailing to ask for support in recruiting participants, either through social media, newsletter, and/or word of mouth.**

I have included an overview of what participating in this study will look like, each phase of this study is **voluntary** and if participants no longer wish to participate, they are free to withdraw from the study. I have also attached a pdf of my recruitment flyer. If you are able to include this in your social media outlet and/or newsletter that would be amazing.

Here is a quick blurb if there is space:

🌟 If you are a first-generation college student, who receives military education benefits, and is between the ages of 18 to 23 years-old we are looking for you to be part of this study!! If you would like to participate in a study exploring your college experience, please reach out to Jemefer at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu. Those who volunteer will receive a \$10 Target gift card! 🌟

In my study, I will use the following process to engage my participants:

Phases in Study	Activity	Time Commitment
-----------------	----------	-----------------

Pre-Phase	Online Survey; This survey will ask you about demographic questions and if you are a first-generation college student and receive military education benefits.	15 minutes
Phase I	One-on-One Interview; This interview will either be via Zoom or in-person. This will be about your experience as a student that receives military education benefits	30 – 45 minutes
Phase II	Community Building Group; This will include a community building activity that will focus on the group's experience as students receiving military education benefits	45 – 60 minutes
Phase III	Data Review Session; Participating in this discussion will be about the overall results of the study and feedback.	45 minutes

Appendix F

Email to Military Connected List

Hello!

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Jemefer Angela Cruz and I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts Higher Education Leadership program. One of my graduate requirements is to conduct an Action Research project, which I am conducting under the supervision of Dr. Kecia Brown. **I am currently starting my research on the college experiences of first-generation military-dependent children.** Through my research, I hope to understand the college experiences of this group and how (if at all) they are impacted by receiving military education benefits.

I am emailing you because you are a military-connected student; if you are also a first-generation college student and receiving military education benefits and would like to participate in my research, please click on this [link](#).

If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to:

- Complete an online survey (15 minutes)
- Participate in an One-on-One interview (30-45 minutes)
- *Participate in a Community Building Group (45-60 minutes)
- *Participate in a data review session (45 minutes)
- Total participation is **approximately 165 minutes**

*Light refreshments will be served at all in person sessions.

Please note that participation in this study is **voluntary** and if you no longer wish to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Please note: Those who participate in the study will receive a \$10 Target gift-card, even if you choose not to complete the study.

I have also attached a copy of my recruitment flyer in case you are willing to share it with other folks in the USD community.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to email me at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu

Appendix G

Participant Disqualification Email

Hello [student name],

Thank you for considering participation in the study: *The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence*.

Although you have completed the survey/or expressed interest in being a part of this study, you do not meet the qualifications of:

- Between the ages of 18 to 28 years old
- A first-generation college student
- Receiving military education benefits
- A military child

I greatly appreciate your thoughtfulness in considering my invitation to participate. My hope is that you will continue to support research on the military-connected community in the future.


Thank you again for your consideration. I wish you the very best in your future endeavors.

Respectfully,

Appendix H

Updated Recruitment Flyer

volunteers
needed for study on your
college experience



Are you:

- ✓ A First-Generation College Student?
- ✓ Receiving
military education benefits?
- ✓ A military child?
- ✓ Between 18 to 28 years old?

This voluntary study includes:

- 15 minutes online survey
- 30 - 45 minutes interview (in-person or via Zoom)
- 45 - 60 minutes Community Building Group (in person)
- 45 minutes Data Review Session (in person)

Location: 5998 Alcala Park Way, San Diego, CA

For more information contact:
Jemefer Angela Cruz at jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu
Participants will receive a \$10 Target gift card

Appendix I

Follow-up Email: One-on-One Interview

Hello (student name),

Thank you so much for submitting the survey for the research study: *The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence*. Given your responses to the survey questions, you meet the following requirements:

- Between the ages of 18 to 28 years old
- A first-generation college student
- Receiving military education benefits
- A military child (meaning a parent or parents served or is currently serving in the military)

Before we proceed with the One-on-One interview, I would like to ask a clarifying question: are you a military child?

If you are a military child, we will be able to proceed. According to the availability you indicated on the survey, would you be available to have an in-person One-on-One interview on —, — at —? If this time no longer works for you, please let me know your availability.

Please feel free to let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Respectfully,

Appendix J

Phase I: One-on-One Interview Questions:

1. How does receiving military educational benefits make you feel about your college experience, thus far?
2. What impact, if any, do those feelings have on your experience?
3. How do military educational benefits impact your everyday experiences?
4. How do military educational benefits impact your family relationships?
5. Did receiving military education benefits change your family dynamics?

Appendix K

Informed Consent Form

University of San Diego Institutional Review Board Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:

The Effects of Military Education Benefits on First-Generation Military-Dependent Children's College Experience and Independence

I. Purpose of the research study

Jemefer Angela Cruz is a student in the Master of Arts Higher Education Leadership Program at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: find out what your experience has been receiving military education benefits.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

Phases in Study	Activity	Time Commitment
Pre-Phase	Online Survey - Completed	15 minutes
Phase I	One-on-One Interview; This interview will either be via Zoom or in-person. This will be about your experience as a student that receives military education benefits	30 – 45 minutes
Phase II	Community Building Group; This will include a community building activity that will focus on the group's experience as students receiving military education benefits	45 – 60 minutes

Phase III	Data Review Session; Participating in this discussion will be about the overall results of the study and feedback.	45 minutes
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Please note that you will be audiorecorded during *Phase I: One-on-One Interview* if you decide to do an in-person interview.

Your participation in this study will take a total of **about 135 minutes** over a 3 month period.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

- San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339.
- The 24-hour San Diego Access and Crisis Line (1-888-724-7240)
- University of San Diego Counseling Center “counselor-on call” at 619-260-4655.

If you would like to make an appointment with an on-campus Counselor, please contact the Counseling Center at (619-260-4655). You may also create an appointment by going to their website: <https://mywellness.sandiego.edu>.

**The on-campus Counseling Center is located at:
Saints Tekakwitha & Serra Hall 300**

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the college experiences of students that receive military education benefits.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and **may not** be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you a \$10 gift card to Target that will be provided to you via e-mail.

You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Jemefer Angela Cruz

Email: jemeferangelacruz@sandiego.edu

Phone: (619) 430-9625

2) Dr. Kecia Brown

Email: keciabrown@sandiego.edu

Phone: 760-402-9178

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Zoom Video Recording: Additional Consent

If you decide to partake in *Phase I: One-on-One Interview* via Zoom, the session will be video recorded. The video recording of this session will only be used for data collection purposes and

transcript analysis. The video recording will not be shared and will be deleted once the study has been completed.

In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to sign or NOT sign the statement below.

I hereby give permission to the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used only for data collection purposes. I understand that this Zoom video recording will not be publicly released or shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

Appendix L

Community Building Group

Wednesday, April 20th

8-9 pm

SLP 424

1. Check-in (10 minutes)

- a. Ice Breaker & Participant Introductions
 - i. Name, pronouns, year
- b. Reiterate study & purpose
 - i. Study: analyzing the effects of military education benefits on the experiences of FG Military dependent children
 - ii. Purpose:
 1. Fill gap in literature
 2. Find ways to support this population, improve military programs, bring students w/in this population together & try to create a sense of community & hear each other's experiences
- c. Provide *An Invitation to A Brave Space* poem & introduce Community Guidelines
 - i. *An Invitation to A Brave Space* poem
 - ii. Community Guidelines
 1. Honor and be open to difference
 2. Own your intentions and your impact
 3. Lean into discomfort and observe your resistance
 4. Speak for yourself (use "I statements")
 5. Discuss issues as if someone in the room is impacted by them
 6. What's said here stays here; what's learned here leaves here

2. Activity: (15 minutes)

- a. Instructions:
 - i. Using the post-it notes, please write a one to two sentence answer to each question you see around the room. There are five question posters with questions around the room so you should have five post-its.
 1. Questions on posters:
 - a. How does receiving military educational benefits make you feel about your college experience, thus far?
 - b. What impact, if any, do those feelings have on your experience?
 - c. How do military educational benefits impact your everyday experiences?

- d. How do military educational benefits impact your family relationship?
 - e. Did receiving military education benefits change your family dynamics?
 - ii. Once you have finished posting your answers to the posters, please partake in the Gallery Walk and read your peers' answers.
- b. **Debrief: (15 minutes)**
 - i. What are your observations?
 - ii. What feelings/emotions are coming up for you after reading your peers' experiences?
- 3. **Closing: (10 minutes)**
 - a. Looking back at your experiences, with USD's Military and Veterans Program, what kind of support would you like to be available for future first-generation military-dependent children?
- 4. **Thank You**

Appendix M

Post Research Participation Email

Subject: Post-Research Participation Q + Gift Card!

Hi there,

Happy Friday!

Thank you:

I just wanted to say thank you so much for being so gracious and taking the time to participate in my research project! As you know, it is part of my graduate requirement, so I really appreciate your support.

Post-Research Participation Question:

Unfortunately, due to timing constraints, we're unable to meet for the Community Build Group, but I would still really love to hear your insights.

If you could please answer the following in a couple sentences that would be great!

Question: Looking back at your experiences, with USD's Military and Veterans Program, what kind of support would you like to be available for future first-generation military-dependent children?

Gift Card:

As indicated in my recruitment email/flyer, please let me know what kind of gift card you would like! (Amazon, Target, Starbucks, etc).