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Availability of Tuition Assistance Funding Effects on Educational Pursuits

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**AVAILABILITY OF TUITION ASSISTANCE FUNDING EFFECTS ON
EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS**

A Research Paper

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of STEM Education and
Professional Studies
Old Dominion University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Science in Occupational and
Technical Studies Degree

By

Geneva M. Dooley
Fall 2015

APPROVAL PAGE

This research study was prepared by Geneva M. Dooley under the direction of Dr. John Ritz for SEPS 636, Problems in Occupational and Technical Studies, at Old Dominion University. It was submitted to the Research Advisor as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree.

Approved by: _____

Date: _____

Dr. John Ritz
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Geneva M. Dooley

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Tuition Assistance (T.A.) is a program afforded to eligible members of the United States Armed Services to fund tuition costs. In May of fiscal year 2013, the program was abruptly halted when Congress could not reach an agreement in reference to the Appropriations Act. Ultimately, a temporary deal was struck to fund the government until October. October came and yet again, the program was plagued by a government shutdown which resulted in the furlough of civilian employees that process T.A. applications for servicemembers. Due to the uncertainty of T.A. funding, servicemembers began visiting the Quantico Voluntary Education Center seeking counseling about their options for funding their education. Members voiced their concerns about not being able to take advantage of T.A. Some members decided to drop courses, pay out of pocket, or seek additional funding sources.

The beginning of Fiscal Year 2014 brought new restrictions for Marines looking to use T.A. MarAdmin 411/13 detailed the new guidelines set forth by Headquarters Marine Corps. Among the changes were: GPA requirements, a time in-service commitment (first time users must be on active duty for two years), two Marine Corps Institute (MCI) courses had to be taken prior to being approved for T.A., and members were not allowed to use the program if the course they wanted to use T.A. benefits ended more than two months prior to their separation date. Each Marine Corps installation was given a very limited budget for T.A. Therefore, Education Services Officers (ESO) had to set their own rules on how they would disperse the funding, with most limiting members to one course at a time or one course per quarter. The availability of T.A. funding

affected Marines and this study sets to investigate how it impacted the educational pursuits of members.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of this study was to investigate how the availability of Tuition Assistance funding effects the educational pursuits of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Quantico during fiscal years 2013 and 2014.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To guide this study, the following research questions were created:

RQ₁: What is the likelihood that members will continue to pursue their education without T.A. funding?

RQ₂: Do members seek alternatives to T.A. funding?

RQ₃: How does a change in T.A. eligibility requirements affect T.A. usage?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Tuition Assistance is a program offered by the Department of Defense (DOD) to servicemembers of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard to pay for tuition expenses for eligible members. The United States Marine Corps has been a long proponent of producing an educated workforce. According to Anderson (1991), “The Tuition Assistance Program has been the principal vehicle for helping enlisted active duty servicemembers afford the costs of participating in college programs and courses since May 7, 1947” (p. 1). The DOD understands the benefit afforded to members that wish to seek post-secondary education. “A DOD official explained that the education program was designed so servicemembers could (1) improve their value to the service; (2) have an opportunity to continue civilian education while in the service; and

(3) make profitable use of their spare time” (as cited in Buddin & Kapur, 2002, p. 2). TA is an integral funding resource that servicemembers utilize; it has implications for not only employment preparation while on active duty but also upon separation and in terms of personal growth.

This study is helpful in determining the necessity of the Tuition Assistance program. In 2011, the United States of America saw a withdrawal of its military presence in Iraq and subsequent drawback of its presence in Afghanistan. As the Armed Forces began to transition from war-time to a return to peace-time, the need to reduce the overall size of the military was required. According to the *Marine Corps Times* (2012), over a span of four years, 20,000 Marines will be cut from the corps. This reduction makes it essential that Marines are prepared to make the transition to civilian life seamlessly and without too much interruption to their career. Tuition Assistance is one way in which members can combat the cost of post-secondary education and better prepare themselves for life upon separation from the Corps. This study was derived from issues expressed by members both nearing separation and those that intend to make a career of the Marine Corps regarding the availability of T.A. funding.

LIMITATIONS

This research study had the following limitations:

1. The study reviewed T.A. usage of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico.
2. Data collected did not include every servicemember stationed at Quantico that took advantage of T.A. during the time being studied.

3. T.A. usage was reviewed during one of the most volatile fiscal climates in the U.S. government in the past decade.

ASSUMPTIONS

This research study was based on the following assumptions:

1. Marines are willing to participate in the study and provide their experience with T.A. during FY 2013 and FY 2014.
2. All Marines utilizing T.A during FY 2013 and 2014 were somehow affected by the instability of T.A. funding.
3. The majority of Marines seeking T.A. are not familiar with alternative funding options.

PROCEDURES

To determine if and how Marines at MCB Quantico were affected by the availability of T.A. funding during Fiscal year 2013 and 2014, a sample of the population participated in a focus group. This descriptive qualitative data collecting method was chosen because it permitted the researcher the ability to gain an in-depth perspective from key stakeholders in the TA Program. The focus group allowed for a comprehensive dialogue that expressed information in terms of the experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and insights held by Marines. To provide an accurate picture of the members that utilized T.A. during the said timeframe, the following demographics were obtained and/or observed: gender, rank, estimate of tuition costs to include fees not covered by TA, number of years participating in TA Program, and the usage rate of TA. The aim of the focus group was to collect information about the various reasons why members pursue

Post-Secondary education, how their relationship with the Marine Corps correlates to T.A. usage, and determine means for seeking additional funding in their pursuit for higher education. After collecting the data, the information will be compiled, analyzed, and reported.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

To provide a clear understanding of terms that have special meaning to the study, the following list was created:

- **College 101**-Tuition Assistance (T.A.) orientation brief mandated by Marine Corps Order 1560.25 for first-time users of T.A.
- **Credit by Examination**-exams designed to give college credit for courses in which students have demonstrated mastery of content based on exam scoring, commonly referred to examples are CLEP and DSST.
- **DANTES**-Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support
- **ESO**-Education Services Officer, person responsible for managing the T.A. program at their designated military base.
- **G.I. Bill**-law that provides a range of benefits for members of our armed forces.
- **MarAdmin**-Marine Administrative Message.
- **Marine Corps Order**-policy documents such as regulations, manuals, or orders that are related to the U.S. Marine Corps.
- **MECEP**-abbreviation for Marine Corps Enlisted Commissioning Educational Program, one of many commissioning programs for enlisted Marines to become officers.

- **Tuition Assistance (T.A.)**-a military-sponsored program that reimburses military members for the cost of college classes while on active duty.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how T.A. funding effects the educational pursuits of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico. In Chapter I the reader was introduced to the problem. It also laid the foundation for the study and its implication for the continued use of uninterrupted T.A. funding. To guide the study, research goals as well as assumptions were identified and presented. Accordingly, characteristics that impacted and influenced the research study were reviewed and a listing of terms was defined in order to provide clarity. The procedures section of Chapter I serve to acquaint the reader with the data collecting instrument and the treatment of data utilized by the researcher.

Chapter II provides a review of literature that directly impacts the study in an attempt to discover the important variables related to the research problem. Variables unveiled include: the desire to expand knowledge, requirement for promotion, transition to civilian life, and sustainability. An outline of the methods and procedures used to collect data is divulged in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, the results of the study are presented. The final analysis is reported in Chapter V, in addition to the conclusion and the recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature provides an overview of research that has been collected about the DOD Tuition Assistance program. Although the literature covers a wide variety of information in reference to continuing education in the military, this review will primarily focus on three major areas: adult learners, DOD tuition assistance program, and alternatives to funding. The literature reviewed had four major themes that emerged throughout the works: the desire to expand knowledge, requirement for promotion, transition to civilian life and sustainability.

ADULT LEARNERS

Adult and continuing education play an important role in society. It provides a solid foundation for the facilitation of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning touches every facet of adult existence; there are numerous resources to assist adults in their learning. Some examples of these sources are ESL programs offered by many local and state municipalities for foreign speakers, workforce development programs offered by colleges and universities to advance the skills of adults seeking employment and the Department of Defense Tuition Assistance program designed to support the educational pursuits of our military. *Learning in Adulthood* (Merriam et al., 2002) describes three factors characteristic of American society that affect what adults want to learn: demographic changes, globalization, and technology. Military members constantly train; they are kept abreast on technological and global trends in relation to business and industry standards. They see first-hand how globalization affects their respective industries.

Studies have been conducted to explain why adults participate in learning and what motivates them to do so. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) conducted the first national study of participation, uncovering employment as motivation, “vocational goals most frequently direct adults into continuing education” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2002, p. 62). Military students have unique qualities that can either aid or hinder their participation. Buddin and Kapur (2002) found that “more than 60 percent of recruits cite educational opportunities as one of the primary reasons they join the military” (p. 1). This has direct implications for military involvement. However, deployments and the scarce availability of quality educational programs that are tailored to meet the military lifestyle can serve as barriers to participation. Merriam et al. (2002) suggest that, “participation in adult education is largely a voluntary activity, knowing who is participating, reasons for participating, and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation can help providers better serve adult learners” (p. 53). The DOD Tuition Assistance program is designed to support participants by offering financial backing to reach their lifelong learning goals. In accordance, Persyn and Polson (2012) state that training and education programs provide military members with a true lifelong learning experience spanning their careers and beyond through in-service continuing professional development, voluntary education opportunities for self-improvement and advancement, and significant postmilitary educational opportunities (p. 5).

TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Department of Defense off-duty, Voluntary Education Programs constitutes one of the largest continuing education programs in the world. Each year, approximately 300,000 servicemembers enroll in postsecondary courses leading to associate, bachelors,

masters, and doctorate degrees (U.S. DOD, 2014). Servicemembers take advantage of the program to advance their careers while on active duty and to prepare them for civilian life upon separation. In 1991 a report was produced by Clinton Anderson, an independent consultant, to the U.S. Army Forces Command about the Tuition Assistance Program. The report was comprised of information analyzed from congressional hearings, DOD directives, and previous studies about tuition assistance participation. The report concluded three major factors: (a) the TA Program plays an intrinsic part in the lifelong learning cycle of servicemembers, (b) there is a strong correlation between retention/promotion and participation in the TA Program, and finally (c) although supported by Congress, the TA Program will constantly be challenged as budget cuts are made. According to Anderson (1991), “The level of support for Tuition Assistance is a clear barometer of a military service’s attitude toward educational development: when Tuition Assistance is reduced, enrollments decline. When it ceases, their soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines simply feel that they cannot afford to go to school” (p. 1).

FY13 and FY14 Tuition Assistance Availability

The Department of the Navy released MCO 1560.25 which established the guidelines for the Marine Corps Lifelong Learning Program. The initial order outlined the eligibility requirements, funding provisions, funding criteria, T.A. participant requirements, officer obligations, and administration regulations. During FY 13 and FY 14 Marines saw drastic changes to the T.A. program outlined in the MCO. The program was directly impacted by the government shutdown which forced education centers onboard military installations to temporarily close and resulted in the suspension of T.A. funding. When the program was finally restored, Marine TA had some of the strictest

eligibility requirements, more so than any other branch of service. Sanborn (2013)

outlined the changes:

Prerequisites for first-time TA applicants were toughened in September when a slew of new requirements brought Marine Corps policy in line with the Navy's tougher rules. Among new requirements, Marines were required to attend both a leadership and a financial management class before their requests for assistance could be approved...Other changes made in September to toughen eligibility rules remain in place. They include a time-in-service requirement; Marines must serve at least 24 months before applying. Additionally, first-time students will only be approved for one course. For all Marines, funds approved for classes that a Marine later fails will count toward the \$4,500 annual maximum. Financial assistance will be approved for only one course following a semester during which a Marine's grade-point average falls below 2.5, he receives a "D" or voluntarily withdraws from a course. (para. 10)

Every year the Council of College and Military Educators (CCME) convene to discuss topics that impact the military community. At the 2015 CCME conference, Dawn Bilodeau, Chief Voluntary Education Program and DOD Liaison presented updates for the DOD Voluntary Education Program. Bilodeau reported on every branch of service with the exception of the United States Coast Guard. For the purpose of this study the information she provided about the Marine Corps T.A. during FY14 will be reviewed. Her conclusion are listed below:

- Government shutdown at onset of FY14 resulted in slow start for T.A. users

- The number of T.A. users increased
- Fewer courses were authorized in comparison to the previous FY
- Marines on average took less courses than other servicemembers
- Majority of TA users complete their education after leaving service
- Marines account for 6% of T.A. users
- Marines have the lowest course completion rate, 8%

The aforementioned report directly supports the foundation for this study and provides valuable insight into the T.A. program for Marines.

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING RESOURCES

Due to the uncertainty of T.A. funding during FY13 and FY14 many installations, at the direction of Headquarters Marine Corps, encouraged members to take advantage of alternative funding options. Shawn P. Conlon serves as the head of the Personal and Professional Development Branch within the Marine and Family Readiness Division at Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA. During an interview for an *Air Force Times* article, *Corps Restores Tuition Assistance Money*, Conlon encouraged “Marines who are figuring out how to finance their education to visit their local base education staff, who can walk them through the wide variety of funding options, including scholarships, grants, loans and Montgomery or Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits” (Sanborn, 2014, para. 15). Additional options were promoted by base education staff but none so much as DANTESS which boasts support for members through credit-by-examination programs (DSST and CLEP), distance learning programs, and military transcript evaluations amongst other benefits. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) helps institutions determine student eligibility for financial aid to include the Pell Grant, Federal Work-

Study, and Federal student loans. MCO 1560.25 states that Marines can utilize Pell Grant funding in conjunction with TA funding. During the government shutdown funding was suspended for the majority of federal programs to include DANTES and FAFSA thus leaving members in a quandary about how to pay for their education.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MARINE CORPS (RETENTION and SATISFACTION)

The goal of the T.A. program is to positively contribute to the well-being and job satisfaction of Marines that participate. Ryan Gallucci, the Deputy Director of Veterans of Foreign Wars, exclaimed his excitement about T.A. stating that "TA not only develops competent, well-rounded leaders, but also boosts troop morale and quality-of-life" (Terkel, 2013, para. 11). T.A. has long been advertised as both a recruitment incentive and means to maintain retention rates. According to Sisk (2014), "Services have routinely met and exceeded their monthly quotas with recruiters attributing tuition assistance and the new GI Bill for those who leave the service as main factors in influencing young men and women to join the military" (p. 1). However, a study conducted by Buddin and Kapur (2002, p. 50) revealed:

In the Marine Corps, the results from the propensity score model show that the typical TA user has a retention rate 4.4 percentage points lower than a comparable marine who did not participate in TA.

In summary, according to Buddin and Kapur, TA usage does not increase the likelihood that Marines will reenlist. The result of this study has serious implications for the need of the program especially with the government's desire to significantly reduce defense spending. Yet, the results of the study are in direct conflict with a previous study by Garcia and Joy (1998) that revealed T.A. users are more likely to stay in the military

than non-TA users. From Buddin and Kapur's study, policymakers could conclude that the program is not worth sustaining. Over the past decade the Tuition Assistance program has seen an increase in the amount paid for courses. According to Tilghman (2013), "In the 1990s, troops using tuition assistance were expected to pay 25 percent of their school costs out of pocket; shortly after 2001, that benefit was expanded to cover 100 percent of tuition costs up to certain caps" (Worst case assumptions, para. 10).

SUMMARY

There are numerous works that directly impact the study. The review of literature revealed that a recent study conducted by Buddin and Kapur (2002) produced conflicting results in relation to previous studies that found that members who took advantage of T.A. were more likely to stay on active duty service. In addition, research demonstrated that the DOD and servicemembers have favorable thoughts about the program as a whole. Both parties view the program as a cornerstone to Marine development and lifelong learning. The methodology and research approach will be presented in Chapter III. The research design will include various interrelated elements which will be explored through a review of the population, outlining of both the instrument used and the methods of data collection. Lastly, a qualitative analysis will be defined.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The problem of this study was to investigate how the availability of Tuition Assistance funding effects the educational pursuits of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Quantico during fiscal year 2013 and 2014. This research was a descriptive study. The methods and procedures used to gather the data for this study will be discussed in this chapter. Detailed information about the population that was studied will be presented, in addition to facts about the instrument used and the methods of data collection and analysis.

POPULATION

The population for this study consisted of members of the United States Marine Corps that were stationed aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico during fiscal year 2013 and fiscal year 2014. Quantico boasts a population of over 13,000 people of which 6,560 are active duty members. Family members, students, and civilian employees account for the remainder. Although confined to one location, the research can be used to make broader conclusions about the experiences that Marines stationed within and outside of the continental United States have regarding the availability of Tuition Assistance funding. There were a total of ten Marines that participated in the focus group. Morgan (1996) concluded, “small groups make it easier for moderators to manage the active discussions that often accompany high levels of involvement and emotional topics” (p. 146). A standardized number for focus group participants has not been established, however Morgan explained that focus group size should be between 6 and 10 (as cited in

Cheng, 2014, p. 382). The gender, rank, and age group of the servicemembers varied.

Participants had to meet the following qualifications:

1. Member of the United States Marine Corps
2. Stationed at MCB Quantico
3. Eligible for TA funding during both FY13 and FY14
4. Either utilized or attempted to utilize TA funding during said timeframe

INSTRUMENT DESIGN

This study was helpful in determining how the availability of Tuition Assistance funding affects the educational pursuits of Marines. Furthermore, the research provides guidance on the necessity of the Tuition Assistance Program. A draft script was the chosen instrument used during the focus group session. Since focus group discussions are open-ended, the order of the questions provided in the draft script changed dependent on how the researcher saw fit to moderate the discussion. Follow-up questions were added to provide clarifications. The draft script of questions was outlined prior to the start of the focus group. It was comprised of 12 open ended questions. See Appendix A for a listing of the questions. The script was used to focus the discussion on the subject area to determine the impact TA had on the educational goals of servicemembers by assessing the opinions of Marines. The focus group began with a brief introduction of the researcher and an overview to highlight the nature of the research. The final question allowed participants the opportunity to discuss any additional comments. At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were thanked and dismissed.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

It was imperative that the participants of the study met the following requirements: had to be (a) a member of the United States Marine Corps, (b) stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico, (c) eligible for Tuition Assistance funding during both FY13 and FY14, (d) either utilized or attempted to utilize Tuition Assistance funding during said timeframe. The researcher created a flyer, see Appendix B, which outlined the requirements for participation. The flyer was dispersed at various locations aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico, with wide dissemination at the Voluntary Education Center. Marines that responded to the flyer were sent the Electronic Cover Letter. See Appendix C. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, responses were confidential and protected using pseudonyms. Data were collected securely. Personal identification information was not collected or reported. An audio recording was utilized for the study. It was deleted after the data was analyzed. It was used to make assumptions about the population and collect detail from participant conversations.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The responses given during the focus group were analyzed for similarities to gain insight into the effects of TA funding. The audio recording and researcher notes were examined to identify emerging themes using an initial coding framework. Data were organized based on the key categories. Key themes under each outcome were identified and summarized. Student quotes were utilized to enhance the narrative. The response number and percentage were tabulated for questions that were not open-ended.

SUMMARY

This chapter described the population included in the study and the type of instrument and methods used to collect the data. The population consisted of Marines stationed aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico. The participants had to meet several conditions in order to be eligible to participate. The instrument design for this study was comprised of a draft script, which helped to keep the researcher and participants on topic. The information presented in this chapter allowed the reader the ability to gain thorough understanding into the procedures used to collect the data and the process used to analyze the data. Chapter IV will present the findings derived from the collected data.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings of the research study. The purpose of the study was to determine if Tuition Assistance funding effects the educational pursuits of Marines. Data for this study were collected using a focus group technique. Subject responses were reported anonymously and all Marines participated voluntarily. The Marines were asked to respond to twelve questions. The following is a report on data collected on each question asked.

RESPONSES

Question 1 asked the subjects to discuss their reasoning for participating in the T.A. Program. One hundred percent of the participants responded, some participants mentioned more than one reason. The majority of respondents mentioned the following as influencers to participation: 80% (8) promotion potential, 50% (5) family influence, and 50% (5) peer influence. See Table 1.

Table 1

Responses to Question 1

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
Family Influence	50%	5
Peer Influence	50%	5
Promotional Potential	80%	8
Self-Worth	40%	4
Goal Accomplishment	40%	4
School Selection	10%	1

Total 270% 27

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 2 asked if the subjects were familiar with the eligibility requirements for T.A. usage. The majority of respondents 60% (6) were not familiar with the requirements that they had to meet in order to utilize the program. Twenty percent (2) of the respondents were familiar and 20% (2) did not respond to the question. See Table 2.

Table 2

Responses to Question 2

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
No	60%	6
Yes	20%	2
No Response	20%	2
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 3 asked the subjects to express how they felt about their overall experience utilizing the T.A. Program. See Table 3.

Table 3

Responses to Question 3

Responses	Narrative
Respondent 1	I actually feel good about it, sometimes there is no T.A. or I can only take one class but I don't want to pay out of pocket to take more. I know headquarters sets these rules to make sure that everyone gets it.

Respondent 2	I like the program but I think it needs improvements.
Respondent 3	I am glad that the program exists. I probably wouldn't have started school without it.
Respondent 5	Overall, it is a good program but having to take one class at a time is a hassle.
Respondent 8	I've had good and bad experiences with using T.A. sometimes I am speeding through courses and other times I can't take any because of it being shut down.
Respondent 10	Great!

Question 4

Question 4 asked if the subjects had confidence in the T.A. Program. One hundred percent of the respondents responded positively. See Table 4.

Table 4

Responses to Question 4

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
Yes	100%	10
No	0%	0
Unsure	0%	0
No Response	0%	0
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 5

Question 5 asked if the subjects were affected by the T.A. Program during FY13 and FY14. See Table 5. Question 5.1 was a follow-up to Question 5, which asked the subjects to explain how they were affected. See Table 5.1 for narrative.

Table 5

Responses to Question 5

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
No	10%	1
Yes	80%	8
No Response	10%	1
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Table 5.1

Responses to Question 5.1

Responses	Narrative
Respondent 1	I also dropped my classes, I had registered for two but didn't have a way to pay for them.
Respondent 2	I was affected, I had to drop my course.
Respondent 3	My first class started at the beginning of the quarter so I was able to use T.A. for that class. I registered for another because my school offers new ones (classes) every month, but I couldn't use T.A. because the Ed Center ran out of money by the time my class started.

Respondent 4	I paid \$1500 for school, my school didn't care that there was a shutdown, they wanted their money. I didn't want to stop so I paid it.
Respondent 5	I could only take one class at a time, that put me behind the schedule that I had set for myself
Respondent 7	I wasn't really affected, listening to everyone else, I must've been lucky! My classes were paid (by T.A.).
Respondent 8	My pockets were affected!
Respondent 10	I dropped a class.

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 6

Question 6 asked if the subjects were able to utilize T.A. funding for the entire FY13 and FY14. The majority of respondents 90% (9) were not able to use T.A. for the entirety of both fiscal years and 10% were not. See Table 6.

Table 6

Responses to Question 6

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
No	90%	9
Yes	10%	1
No Response	0%	0
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 7

Question 7 asked if the subjects had to overcome any obstacle to use T.A. during said timeframe. See Table 7. Respondents reported the following as obstacles: 80% (8) lack of communication, 60% (6) confusing eligibility requirements, 20% (2) confusing application, and 50% (5) said money.

Table 7

Responses to Question 7

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
Lack of Communication	80%	8
Eligibility Requirements	60%	6
Confusing Application	20%	2
Money	50%	5
Total	210%	21

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 8

Question 8 asked the subjects if T.A. was their only resource to pay for their education during FY13 and FY14. The majority of participants, 50% (5), used primarily T.A. funding to pay for their courses. See Table 8 for narrative.

Table 8

Responses to Question 8

Responses	Narrative
Respondent 1	Yes.

Respondent 2	I applied for FAFSA but I didn't qualify for the Pell Grant, so I only used T.A. when I could.
Respondent 3	Yes, I only had T.A. to rely on.
Respondent 4	I paid over \$1000 last year, recruiters don't tell you that you won't be able to go to school when you want.
Respondent 5	The Pell Grant is great, I use it whether I can get T.A. or not.
Respondent 6	I took out a loan.
Respondent 7	I only used Tuition Assistance.
Respondent 8	I am not happy about it, I had to dip into my savings to pay for my two of my classes.
Respondent 9	I used T.A., I paid for one class, and my school offered a free course during the shutdown.
Respondent 10	My primary source was Tuition Assistance, I would get barriers when I tried other methods to pay for my courses.

Question 9

Question 9 asked if the subjects thought there were enough funding resources for Marines that want to go to school. The majority of participants 60% (6) responded that there were not enough funding resources for Marines. Thirty percent (3) of the respondents replied that there are enough resources and 10% (1) did not respond to the questions. See Table 9.

Table 9

Responses to Question 9

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
No	60%	6
Yes	30%	3
No Response	10%	1
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 10

Question 10 asked if the subjects were familiar with any of the following: Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), G.I. Bill, Scholarships, CLEP/DSST Testing, Grants, or Free Classes offered by schools during FY13 and FY14. The majority of respondents were familiar with FAFSA 60% (6), G.I. Bill benefits 100% (10), CLEP/DSST 100% (10), and Grants 60% (6). The bulk of participants were least familiar with Scholarships 100% (10) See Table 10.

Table 10

Responses to Question 10

Category	Familiar	Not Familiar	Number of Responses
FAFSA	60%	40%	10
G.I. Bill benefits	100%	0%	10
Scholarships	0%	100%	10
CLEP/ DSST	100%	0	10
Grants	60%	40%	10

Free Classes	20%	80%	10
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Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 11

Question 11 asked if the subjects would stop pursuing their educational goals if T.A. were not available. All participants 100% (10) would continue their educational goals if T.A. were not available. See Table 11.

Table 11

Responses to Question 11

Responses	Percentage %	Number of Responses
No	100%	10
Yes	0%	0
No Response	0%	0
Total	100%	10

Notes: Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

Question 12

Question 12 asked the subjects if there were any additional comments, there were none.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

In order to analyze the data from the study, the researcher compiled the statistical data and the narrative presented by the participants. The researcher looked for common themes and categories across the entries for each of the focus group questions. First, a database was created with different sheets for each question. Columns were established on each sheet which included the following labels: respondent, response, and coding. Once all data were reported on the sheets, the content was labeled with various categories which identified commonalities amongst the responses. In the initial coding stage, each category was assigned a theme. The categories were then sorted by the entries with the most amount of themes. At this stage the researcher was able to reduce the amount of themes by re-categorizing the data this resulted in the final coding: participation, T.A. funding and alternative funding, and barriers to use. See Table 12.

Table 12

Coding Framework

Initial Coding Themes	Final Coding Themes
Peer and Family Influence Self-Worth Promotion Potential School Selection	Participation
\$4500 FY Cap Out of Pocket Expenses Credit by Examination Financial Aid	TA Funding and Alternative Funding
Confusing Application Ambiguous Requirements Lack of Communication	Barriers to Use

Participation

All ten participants provided information about their reason for participating in the T.A. Program. One hundred percent of respondents had confidence in the Tuition Assistance program. Five of the 10 participants use the T.A. Program to fund their post-secondary education goals because of peer or family influence. Eight Marines stated their T.A. usage was based on increasing their promotion potential. Four of the 10 participants partake in the program because it fulfills their need for self-worth and goal accomplishment. Only one servicemember cited school selection as the primary reason for participation. Further probing revealed that having easy access to schools aboard the base played a factor in involvement.

Some responses to the questions were as follows:

“I have used T.A. for almost 6 years. I started because I wanted to be the first person in my family to graduate.”

“I started at another base. My advisor visited my shop, she is the reason I started. I like being able to talk with someone, taking classes on base, and testing on the base.”

“One of the requirements for MECEP is to have 12 credit hours of college courses completed. My plan is to submit my package for the board so I am using T.A. for that.”

“I have a child and I want her to be proud of me. I want her to know how valuable it is to have an education.”

Funding

The Marines offered a plethora of reasons for their decision to use alternative funding resources toward degree completion. All ten participants were familiar with the G.I. Bill, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), CLEP, and DSST exams. Four of the participants have taken advantage of the credit by examination program. Half

of the participants have completed the FAFSA. Two of the 10 participants anticipated that they will exhaust their T.A. funding before being able to complete their desired amount of courses for the fiscal year. Three of the 10 participants have paid out of pocket for courses. One of the respondents took out a loan to pay for courses during the instability of T.A. during FY13 and FY14.

Some responses to the questions were as follows:

“I know about the G.I. Bill but I’m not using it, I am saving it for my daughter.”

“Taking CLEP(s) don’t look good, not for the school that I am going to. They want you actually going to class not testing out of it”

“I don’t understand who, well I know who, Headquarters, comes up with this arbitrary number of \$4500 per fiscal year. I can’t finish school taking only 6 classes a year. What if I don’t want to go to a school that charges \$250 (per semester hour)? Why can’t I use my money all at once, give me the \$4500 and I’ll spend it how I like on the school that I think is best.”

“Well, I have used T.A., FAFSA, and CLEPs. I use whatever I need to get my degree completed. I am thankful for the money, plus I am not touching my Post 9/11.”

“If I used every test and aid offered, I would still have to complete 30% of my courses with my school to get there degree so only being able to take 6 classes a year hurts Marines.”

Barriers to Use

Respondents reported feelings of frustration when trying to make use of the T.A. Program. An overwhelmingly majority of participants, 8 of the 10, reported that TA is difficult to use because of lack of communication. Six of the respondents stated that the eligibility requirements are ambiguous and flawed. Two of the participants responded that the application is confusing.

Some responses were as follows:

“Why do Marines have to be on active duty for two whole years before they can use

T.A.? They can die for their country on day one but can't use T.A. I think that is absurd and disgraceful to the men and women that fight for our country.”

“I agree, it is hard to know if you can use it (T.A. Program) or not. Every time I try to submit an application, I have something wrong because some new requirement was released that I didn't know anything about.”

“Not only that, the application is confusing. I prefer walking to my C.O. and have him sign it and then go to the Ed Center not wait for an email.”

“Compared to FAFSA, having to enroll in TA is a hassle.”

SUMMARY

The findings for the study were presented in Chapter IV. Participants in the study answered 12 questions during a focus group session. Not all subjects responded to all questions. The questions were asked in order to obtain data to help the researcher determine if the availability of Tuition Assistance funding affects the educational pursuits of Marines. In Chapter IV it was discovered that there were three key themes that emerged during the focus group session. These themes were used as a coding framework to analyze respondent feedback. In this chapter the findings from the Marines that participated in the TA Program were presented and analyzed. The data illustrated an overview of participation, demonstrated the funding aspect of the T.A. Program, and reported the barriers to T.A. usage. In Chapter V, a summary of the research will be presented along with conclusions drawn and recommendations made from the data collected.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will provide a summary, draw conclusions based on the findings, and make recommendations for further studies. A summarization will provide an overview of the study. In order to draw conclusions, the research goals will be examined based upon the findings in Chapter IV. Finally, recommendations will be offered for related studies in the future.

SUMMARY

Every fiscal year eligible Marines take advantage of the Tuition Assistance program. Recently, the program has been plagued with funding limitations and eligibility requirements imposed on those that wish to utilize T.A. funding. The problem of this study was to determine the effects of Tuition Assistance funding on the educational pursuits of Marines. To solve this problem three research questions were established:

RQ₁: What is the likelihood that members will continue to pursue their education without T.A. funding?

RQ₂: Do members seek alternatives to T.A. funding?

RQ₃: How does a change in T.A. eligibility requirements affect T.A. usage?

The study is helpful in determining the necessity of the Tuition Assistance program. The limitations of the study were as follows:

1. The study reviewed T.A. usage of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico.
2. Data collected did not include every servicemember stationed at Quantico that took advantage of T.A. during the time being studied.

3. T.A. usage was reviewed during one of the most volatile fiscal climates in the U.S. government in the past decade.

The population of this study consisted of Marines stationed aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico that utilized or attempted to utilize T.A. funding during fiscal years 2013 and 2014. Participants were asked to partake in a focus group in order to gather valuable insight into their Tuition Assistance experience and to paint a truthful image of the people whom the program serves. Ten Marines voluntarily participated in the focus group. The researcher compiled the data for analysis and review. The qualitative data analysis revealed three all-encompassing themes from the study: participation, funding, and barriers to use. The findings discussed in this report highlight in-depth the experiences and beliefs of Marines that utilize T.A. funding. The researcher collected data by means of a focus group because of its propensity to illicit on the spot feedback. The respondents' comments have led to new ideas about the Tuition Assistance program. All participants were extremely grateful for the T.A. Program. Participants discussed a variety of factors that influence their decision to participate in the program, seek alternative funding and impede their ability to take full advantage of it. Participants have overwhelming support of the program and find that it plays an integral part in their pursuit to reach their lifelong learning goals.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data collected from the focus group, the following conclusions were drawn:

Research Question 1: What is the likelihood that members will continue to pursue their education without T.A. funding?

According to the findings, it can be concluded that Marines will pursue their education with or without T.A. funding. Marines participate in the program for many reasons. Funding will not deter the servicemembers from earning their degrees. However, respondents did make it clear that if they were to utilize only T.A. funding, they would not be able to complete their degrees in what they consider to be a timely manner.

Research Question 2: Do members seek alternatives to T.A. funding?

The findings indicated that Marines seek alternatives to T.A. funding. Results from the study revealed that 100 percent of the participants were familiar with numerous funding options. Fifty percent of the respondents had completed an application for Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in the hopes to qualify for the Pell Grant. Thirty percent of respondents have utilized their own personal bank accounts to pay for courses when T.A. was not available or they did not qualify for use. One member secured a loan to pay for courses during the instability of T.A. funding during both fiscal years 13 and 14. Surprisingly, no one mentioned scholarships as a funding resource. When probed by the researcher no one had applied for scholarships.

Research Question 3: How does a change in T.A. eligibility requirements affect T.A. usage?

The eligibility requirements of the T.A. Program generated the most emotional responses from participants. An astounding 80 percent of respondents reported that it was hard to stay abreast of the changes with the T.A. Program because of a lack of communication and ambiguous requirements to participate. It can be concluded that servicemembers missed out on opportunities to use T.A. because of misinformation and confusion about who could participate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the discussion and responses that Marines are committed to utilizing the TA Program. Although, this study was limited to ten Marines, the researcher recommends the following, based on the data collected from the participants:

1. Further research should focus on the impacts of the fiscal year cap on T.A. usage.
2. A similar study opened to more participants of the T.A. program should be conducted to gain a clearer picture of how servicemembers are affected by T.A. funding. This study was open to only servicemembers stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico.
3. Policy should focus on the need for clear channels of communication to inform T.A. users about changes to the program.
4. Consideration should be made to investigate if creative and unique ways to disperse T.A. funding to members that have met their FY cap can be established.
5. An inquiry should be made into building awareness about alternative funding options to include scholarships, credit by examinations, and applying for FAFSA.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Draft Script and Questions

Welcome everyone, thank you for making your time available to attend this focus group. My name is Geneva Dooley, I am a graduate student at Old Dominion University, I am conducting research on the effects of Tuition Assistance funding on the educational pursuits of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico during fiscal years 2013 and 2014. Your help is valuable, because you can explain what kinds of things are important to the average tuition assistance user.

The discussion will be recorded in-print for post-analysis. All recorded information is confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this research. You have the right to withdraw from this session at any time.

The document that is now being distributed is a consent form. This form provides full disclosure about the nature of the research and your involvement. There is a name tag holder placed in front of your seat, please write the pseudonym that you would like to be referred by during this session.

1. Let's begin by discussing your reasons for participating in the T.A. Program.
2. Is everyone familiar with the eligibility requirements for T.A. usage?
Follow up: How/Why not
3. Thinking about your overall experience, how do you feel about the Tuition Assistance Program?
4. Do you have confidence in the TA Program?
5. Were you affected by the Tuition Assistance Program during FY13 and FY14?
Please explain.
6. Were you able to utilize TA funding for the entire FY13 and FY14? If no, Why not?
7. Did you have to overcome any obstacles to use TA during said timeframe? (If none are mentioned, describe obstacles: lack of time to meet requirements, not enough support, interpersonal issues)
8. Was TA your only resource to pay for your education? (Whether yes or no, please explain).
 - a. Did you seek alternative funding resources during FY13 and FY14 to pay for your education? (why, why not)

9. Do you think there are enough funding resources for Marines that want to go to school?
10. Are you familiar with any of the following: FAFSA, G.I. Bill, Scholarships, CLEPS/DSST Testing, Grants, or Free classes offered by school?
11. Would you stop pursuing your educational goals if TA were not available? Or if there was a lapse in funding?
12. Are there any additional comments?

Thank you for participating, this concludes the focus group.



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WANTED

*Be a part of a group to share their personal perspective
on Tuition Assistance.*

Eligibility:

- Member of the United States Marine Corps
- Stationed at MCB Quantico
- Eligible for Tuition Assistance during FY14
- Utilized or attempted to utilize TA funding during FY14

Date:

- Tuesday, March 31st

Time:

- 1200-1300

Location:

- Old Dominion University
- Quantico Voluntary Education Center,
3089 Roan Street, Quantico, VA 22134

*If you would like to participate or have any questions or concerns
please contact researcher, Geneva Dooley at gdool001@odu.edu*

**Exact location will be provided to confirmed participants*



Appendix C

Electronic Cover Letter

Dear Interested Participants,

I am a graduate student at Old Dominion University. I am conducting research on the effects of Tuition Assistance funding on the educational pursuits of Marines stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico during fiscal years 2013 and 2014. You are invited to take part in a focus group, an assembly of Marines that would like to share their personal perspective and ideas on Tuition Assistance funding.

If you decide to participate, you will join a study involving research on the effects of Tuition Assistance on the educational pursuits of Marines. Furthermore, the research will provide guidance on the necessity of the Tuition Assistance Program.

Participation in a focus group is voluntary. Responses provided during the focus group will be collected confidentially. Transcriptions of the focus group conversations will not identify any participants by name. All data collected, will be reviewed and analyzed by myself and my Responsible Project Investigator, Dr. John Ritz. All collected data will be treated confidential and properly secured. Once the research is complete, the transcription will be destroyed. The focus group should take between one hour and one hour and a half to complete.

If you choose to participate, there will be minimal risks since all data will be secured. There are no direct benefits to you for participating. There may be benefits to Marines that compose the Tuition Assistance community based on the findings we report.

Please consider joining me for the session on Tuesday, March 31st from 5pm-6:30pm. If you choose to participate, reply to this email by Monday, March 30th. Once in receipt of your email you will be provided with the location of the focus group.

If you should have any questions regarding the study or your participation, feel free to contact Geneva Dooley at gdool001@odu.edu.

Thanks in advance for your support.

Geneva M. Dooley
Graduate Student
Old Dominion University

John M. Ritz
Professor and Responsible Project
Investigator
Old Dominion University