



Chapter Title: Introduction

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Introduction

Programs to support military spouses' higher education and employment are relatively new, as there was not much of a need for them in the draft era when most personnel were single and required to serve, or when women's workforce participation in the United States was very limited (Rostker, 2006, 2007; Miller et al., 2011b). Historically, U.S. military spouses did not receive specific accommodations or benefits of any kind. Military wives were expected not to be employed outside the home but instead to be homemakers, raise children, support their spouses, participate in military functions, and do volunteer work for the military (Segal, 1986). Until the late 1980s, officers' work performance was assessed in part on their wives' participation in volunteer activities both inside and outside the military. Spouses' activities were also documented in performance reports and used in determining whether a service member would be promoted (Harrell, 2000; Hosek et al., 2002). These expectations conflicted with any military spouses' interest in or need to develop their own careers and participate in nonmilitary hobbies and activities.

The advent of the all-volunteer force and changing social dynamics in the United States have led to the growing inclusion of women in the workforce and in the military (Rostker, 2006, 2007; Miller et al., 2011b). As spouse employment has risen, attention to their employment needs and the effect of military life on their employment and earnings have increased among policymakers (White House, 2011).

Today, the military services provide a wide array of programs, services, and facilities to support military families. Child care and employment assistance programs have often grown concurrently (Zellman et al., 2009). Other programs for military spouses include deployment assistance services, recreation programs, and Military OneSource—a defense-funded employee assistance program tailored to military life and available at no cost to military service members and their families. The White House declared military family support a national security policy priority in 2010 and highlighted spouse education and employment assistance programs as of particular interest (White House, 2011, p. 1).

Research has shown that military spouses tend to have more years of education than their civilian counterparts, yet they are generally less likely to be employed, and those who are employed tend to earn less, due in part to aspects of military life, such as

frequent moves that disrupt employment, and depressed labor markets around military bases (Booth, 2003; Booth et al., 2000; Booth, Segal, and Bell, 2007; Cooney, 2003; Cooney, De Angelis, and Segal, 2011; Cooke and Speirs, 2005; Harrell et al., 2004; Heaton and Krull, 2012; Hisnanick and Little, 2014; Kniskern and Segal, 2010; Lim, Golinelli, and Cho, 2007; Little and Hisnanick, 2007).

Education- and employment-related programs are particularly important, given that military spouses face several unique challenges that make it difficult to maintain and develop careers. For example, discontinuous work histories limit the amount of work experience an individual can accumulate and may interfere with skill development and on-the-job training, which may dissuade employers from hiring (Cooney, De Angelis, and Segal, 2011). Moreover, those living in high-military labor markets may be disadvantaged in the job market, regardless of work history. For instance, Booth (2003) found that military wives living in labor markets with substantial percentages of active-duty personnel had lower returns to human capital investments, including work experience. Helping military spouses meet their education and employment goals has potentially important consequences for service member recruitment and military satisfaction and retention, as well as for the well-being of military families as a whole (Barnett, Gareis, and Brennan, 2008; Strazdins et al., 2010).

Recently, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) created a portfolio of Spouse Education and Career Opportunities (SECO). These programs include SECO career consultation services available through the Military Spouse Career Center, the My Career Advancement Account (MyCAA) program (described below), the Military Spouse Employment Partnership Program (MSEP), and DoD State Liaison Office initiatives to expand unemployment compensation eligibility to trailing military spouses (those following their service member after a permanent change of station [PCS] move) and to improve portability of occupational licenses and credentials.

The MyCAA Program

DoD's MyCAA program is an educational scholarship program that provides a lifetime maximum of \$4,000 in tuition and examination assistance for eligible spouses pursuing associate's degrees, occupational certificates, or licenses in portable career fields. MyCAA is relatively new: The current version of the program dates back to October 2010. Although an earlier evaluation of MyCAA's program implementation documented successes and challenges associated with a pilot version of MyCAA, that evaluation occurred too early in the program's history to allow assessment of individual-level, short- and long-term outcomes. At the time of the study, most spouses had not completed their training or employment (Needels and Zaveri, 2009; Zaveri, Pisciotta, and Rosenberg, 2009).

The current version of MyCAA is the third major iteration of the program. An earlier demonstration version of MyCAA, which was implemented at 18 installations across eight states¹ beginning in 2007, provided spouses with grants of up to \$3,000 a year for two years to use toward tuition, fees, or other relevant expenses at accredited two-year colleges and technical training centers or to use toward fees required for career credentials and licenses. As of May 2009, about 17 months after the selected states were to begin providing these scholarships, 5,366 MyCAA grants were awarded (Needels and Zaveri, 2009, p. 17).

An implementation study documented successes and challenges of the pilot program, and found in group discussions that spouses participated in MyCAA to

- further career and job prospects
- improve themselves and their self-esteem
- further their education
- contribute to family financial well-being
- engage in a positive distraction during their service member's deployment (Zaveri, Pisciotta, and Rosenberg, 2009, p. 57).

As noted above, this evaluation, while providing useful guidance for a full rollout of the program, was not able to assess program outcomes.

Following that demonstration program, a full-scale MyCAA tuition assistance program was launched across DoD in 2009 to promote employment and portable career opportunities by offering scholarships up to \$6,000 per year to any military spouse. In less than a year, DoD was overwhelmed by the demand: 136,000 spouses enrolled in the program, for an estimated \$250 million in benefits (Harkin, 2010, p. 6). The budget would not sustain a program on this scale, and MyCAA was closed to any new applicants. To save the program and contain costs, DoD scaled the program back by limiting eligibility, approved uses, and the amount of the scholarships (Harkin, 2010, p. 6).

Eligibility

The strategy for the redesigned program is to focus on the spouse population most likely to have the greatest need for assistance and on courses of study likely to provide a more direct and immediate benefit to the employment opportunities of military spouses. In October 2010, DoD launched a redesigned MyCAA program that restricted eligibility to spouses of military personnel in the earliest career ranks and pay grades. Thus, the current program targets spouses who are most likely to be early

¹ The states were California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, North Carolina, and Washington.

in their education and career trajectories.² Spouses eligible for MyCAA must not be in the military themselves and must be married to service members who are serving on active-duty Title 10 orders and in the pay grades of E-1 to E-5, W-1 to W-2, and O-1 to O-2. These military personnel tend to be in their first term of service, so there is also the possibility that MyCAA could serve as a retention tool. Educational benefits from the Post-9/11 GI Bill cannot be transferred to spouses until military personnel have at least six years of service in the armed forces, so most of these spouses would not yet be able to acquire funds from that source.

Approved Uses

MyCAA scholarships focus on promoting “portable careers,” a term used by DoD to refer to high-demand, high-growth careers identified by the Department of Labor as likely to be sustainable over time and that have job openings near military duty locations. MyCAA emphasizes these careers based on the following rationale:

(Attainment of) a portable degree or credential funded with a CAA will help military spouses enter and advance in the workforce even as they relocate when their service member spouses transfer to other bases. A longer-term goal . . . is to encourage the retention of the service member in the military by improving his or her spouse’s job prospects and increasing the satisfaction of the entire family with life in the military. (Zaveri, Pisciotta, and Rosenberg, 2009, p. 1)

MyCAA can be used to pay for education, training, and testing in hundreds of occupations falling into a diverse range of career fields. The original implementation of MyCAA specified only five career fields that met the program focus, including construction, education, financial services, health care, and information technology. In response to feedback from military spouses, MyCAA expanded the career fields offered to include human resources, hospitality, homeland security, and business administration (Needels and Zaveri, 2009, p. 24). This expansion has continued: A complete list of career fields and a sample of MyCAA-approved occupations are presented in Table 1.1. The consistent program goal across these changes has been sponsorship of the pursuit of careers that are portable to accommodate the military lifestyle and its frequent moves.

MyCAA funds can be used for tuition assistance for career-focused associate’s degrees, occupational licenses, and certificates. MyCAA supports pursuit of a high school equivalency certificate or diploma only as a part of a plan to obtain one of these degrees, licenses, or certificates, not as an end in and of itself. The program does not support general studies or the pursuit of bachelor’s or graduate degrees. Tuition for

² Most warrant officers are well advanced in their military careers, but for some Army aviators, this is the entry-level pay grade.

Table 1.1
Sample Portable Occupations, by Career Field

Career Field	Sample Occupations
Aerospace	Aircraft mechanic, aircraft service technician
Animal services	Animal groomer, animal trainer, veterinarian
Automotive services and transportation	Automotive mechanic, police/fire/ambulance dispatcher
Business, finance, and administration	Accountant, real estate agent, tax preparer
Construction	Carpenter, interior designer, painter, welder
Education	Child care worker, K–12 teacher, librarian
Energy	Electrical power-line installer and repairer
Health and human services	Dentist, dietician, medical billing, psychologist
Homeland security	Firefighter, police officer, security guard
Hospitality	Bartender, chef, lifeguard, event planner
Information Technology	Database administrator, software engineer
Legal	Court reporter, lawyer, paralegal
Skilled trades	Barber, journalist, nail technician, translator/interpreter

SOURCE: SECO, 2013.

graduate-level courses that are a part of an approved educational plan or for necessary continuing education in an approved career field may also be authorized.

In addition to tuition, MyCAA scholarships can cover occupational license or credential examinations and associated courses at any level, including at the bachelor's and graduate levels. For example, a teacher holding a bachelor's degree who needs professional recertification in a new state following a PCS move can use a MyCAA scholarship to pay for any courses or exams required for that certification. Many occupations and professions are regulated by state licenses and certificates: A few other examples not in Table 1.1 include truck driver, cosmetologist, electrician, licensed practical nurse, physical therapist, home inspector, computer network administrator, pharmacy technician, and human resource specialist.

Scholarship Amounts

Since October 2010, MyCAA scholarships have provided a maximum education benefit of \$4,000, with an annual fiscal year cap of \$2,000. Annual cap waivers are available for licensure and certificate programs if there is an upfront tuition cost that exceeds \$2,000 (up to the maximum education benefit of \$4,000). The funds are sent one school term at a time directly to the training or license/certification testing institution, not to spouses. MyCAA must approve the accredited institution or testing

facility before granting the scholarship. If the cost of obtaining the degree, license, or certificate exceeds the \$4,000 limit, a spouse must demonstrate the ability to cover the remaining expenses before an application will be approved. In addition to providing funding for schooling, the program connects spouses with career counselors at the Military Spouse Career Center who can help them develop an educational plan and access additional scholarship information, should additional funds be needed. Spouses must be able to finish their program of study within three years from the start date of the first MyCAA-sponsored course: Funds are no longer available after that expiration date. Spouses will also lose access to funds if, during this period, they become ineligible (e.g., through divorce, by joining the military themselves, or if their service member is promoted out of the eligible pay grade or leaves the military).

Use of MyCAA Scholarships

All eligible spouses who apply for a MyCAA scholarship for an approved course of study at an approved institution are provided with a scholarship (i.e., there is no set number of scholarships for which spouses must compete). Analyzing MyCAA program data provided by DoD, RAND found that more than 90,000 spouses have used MyCAA scholarships between the program redesign at the end of October 2010 and the end of November 2013.

Table 1.2 shows the estimated number of associate's degrees, certificates, and licenses obtained by military spouses using MyCAA scholarships in the three years since the program was reconfigured. We say "estimated" because in some cases the schools did not directly confirm completion of the educational plan; however, the school indicated that the final course or the occupational license or certification exam was successfully completed with a passing grade. These numbers likely underestimate completion, as spouses who lost MyCAA eligibility while still in school have no incentive to return to the MyCAA program system and record that they completed the education plan they started under the program.

Table 1.2
MyCAA Education Plans Estimated to Be Completed
Between October 25, 2010, and November 26, 2013

Education Plan	Estimated Number Completed
Associate's degree	4,333
Occupational certificate/credential	19,286
Occupational license	1,076
Total	24,695

SOURCE: MyCAA program data provided by the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy.

Focus of This Study

As part of an ongoing effort to understand the value of MyCAA and to identify options for improving it, the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) asked RAND to analyze data from DoD's 2012 Active Duty Spouse Survey (2012 ADSS) to learn about the education and employment goals and experiences of military spouses eligible for MyCAA and to identify barriers to involvement in MyCAA and to achieving educational and employment goals more broadly.

The 2012 ADSS complements MyCAA user data (e.g., occupational goals, funding, course enrollment, and completion) collected by the program for DoD internal monitoring of MyCAA program use. The analyses conducted in this study can help shed light on the value of MyCAA for spouses and identify ways to improve this program. In addition, the 2012 ADSS provides information on eligible nonusers of the program, who serve as a useful comparison group for MyCAA users. Given that the 2012 ADSS asks only about MyCAA use in the previous calendar year, this study may be thought of as an evaluation of recent MyCAA use and nonuse among rank-eligible spouses. The focus here is on short-term educational and employment outcomes—including attending school, whether spouses are working, and job characteristics and income.

The study examined the following questions:

- Who uses MyCAA?
 - Why do some spouses not use MyCAA?
 - How well does the program reach the population it is intended to support?
- What are the reported educational experiences, preferences, and barriers faced by MyCAA users and nonusers?
 - What percentage of spouses are in school or want to be but are not?
 - Why are some spouses not pursuing additional training and schooling, if they want to?
- What are the reported employment experiences, preferences, and barriers faced by MyCAA users and nonusers?
 - What percentage of spouses are looking for work?
 - Why are some spouses not looking for work?
 - Why do some spouses work part-time instead of full-time?
 - What are the job characteristics of employed spouses?
- What conclusions and recommendations can we draw from spouses' survey responses?

Organization of the Report

The remainder of this report describes the results of the RAND research team's analysis of the administration of the 2012 ADSS and resulting recommendations for the MyCAA program and for DoD's portfolio of SECO programs more broadly. Chapter Two describes RAND's overall study sample and methods. Chapter Three focuses on recent MyCAA use and barriers to use faced by spouses. Chapter Four investigates educational desires and outcomes of MyCAA users and nonusers. Chapter Five examines employment outcomes of MyCAA users and nonusers, including whether they are employed, reasons for not working, job characteristics, and underemployment. Chapter Six concludes the report with recommendations for ways in which DoD could potentially better assist military spouses with their education and employment trajectories. Appendix A describes the variables used in the analyses in Chapter Three, Appendix B compares MyCAA nonusers who are aware of the MyCAA program to those who are unaware, and Appendix C shows the results of multivariate models comparing user and nonuser characteristics, as outlined in Chapter Three.