

The College-wide Military-connected Learner Initiative in K-State's College of Education

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Abstract

The Military-connected Learner Educational Initiative at Kansas State's College of Education, initiated in 2012, provides a college-wide framework preparing in-service and pre-service personnel to serve military, veterans and their families in educational settings. This article describes the college-wide initiative which includes: (1) providing professional development for faculty and students; (2) implementing curricular and co-curricular modifications to address military/veteran-connected issues; (3) conducting research to contribute to the knowledge base about educational issues, strategies and adaptations for military personnel, veterans, and K-12 students in their families. The college is the recipient of the 2014 Taylor Higher Education Partnership of Excellence award from the Military Child Education Coalition.

Keywords: military-connected learners, college-wide initiative, Kansas State University

Introduction

The College of Education at K-State is making a significant contribution to the

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education of military-students and veterans. Further, it is impacting the education of our undergraduate and graduate students in their knowledge of appropriate pedagogy and practice for veterans, members of the military and their families. The College of Education developed a college-wide educational initiative to organize the various military-related activities across the college and to plan for a holistic and sustainable approach to working with our students and faculty. This initiative was built on a strong foundation of decades of involvement with military-connected graduate students by the Adult Education program at Fort Leavenworth and with USD 475 Geary County schools at Fort Riley, a close neighbor of K-State. The initiative described here is unique because it represents a college-wide initiative in a College of Education that has approximately 3,000 students, almost half of which are graduate students. Each of the three college departments has ongoing military-related activities and programs. Educational issues related to military personnel, veterans and their families are being addressed daily by the College of Education who educate teachers, principals, superintendents, adult educators, school counselors, special educators, and postsecondary advising and student personnel services staff.

History of the Initiative

College of Education faculty educate teachers, principals, superintendents, adult educators, school counselors, special educators, postsecondary advising and student personnel services staff. Because K-State's College of Education has close ties to Fort Riley, Fort Leavenworth, and the virtually all of our pre-service teachers complete their clinical training in military-connected school districts around the area, we knew we could make a difference for current military-connected learners. The College of Education became one of the first 100 universities to join Operation Educate the Educators, a nationwide Joining Forces initiative that was given guiding principles set forth by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC). The College of Education also became a member of the MCEC, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, worldwide organization, focused on ensuring quality educational opportunities for all military children affected by mobility, family separation, and transition (<http://www.militarychild.org/about-us/mission>).

In addition to extensive placements in Fort Riley schools for our pre-service educators, the college's adult education program has a long history of engagement at Fort Leavenworth and Command and General Staff College. This work involves faculty, faculty developers and Command and General Staff College students. In the early 90s, the department started a cohort program for the Master's of Adult Education program at Fort Leavenworth. The program has awarded over 600 graduate degrees to officers at the Command and General Staff College in the past 25 years. In addition to the Master's cohorts, the adult education faculty developed doctoral cohorts that included faculty and faculty developers at the CGSC Fort Leavenworth. Recently,

two of the adult education faculty, Cheryl Polson and Jane Fishback in collaboration with K-State's Colleges of Human Ecology and Business developed a leadership training program, the Command Team Spouse Development Program—Brigade. This community engagement program was awarded the Malcolm Knowles Award for Outstanding Program in Adult Education in 2010.

In 2011, Dean Debbie Mercer, starting with the guiding principles set forth by the Educate the Educators program (<http://aacte.org/programs-and-services/operation-educate-the-educators>) that raise the awareness of the unique needs of military-connected students, laid out four initial objectives for our future teachers:

1. Identify the most critical concepts future teachers should know regarding teaching the military-connected child.
2. Make suggestions of where these concepts might best be taught across our teacher education curriculum.
3. Plan professional development sessions for faculty and students.
4. Identify and/or develop resources for faculty and student development to include a documentary featuring military-connected students in our program and their stories.

An educator, Sandy Risberg, who is also a 25-year spouse of a 1st Infantry Division soldier and the mother of two military-connected children, was hired to initiate the Educate the Educators. These efforts in the undergraduate teacher preparation program generated interest in the college's efforts to serve military-connected students at all educational levels.

As a result of an internal Academic Excellence Fund Award, a core group of 14 individuals, including active duty military and military spouses, met monthly for six months to design the framework for the college-wide initiative. The group developed this goal for the initiative was build capacity in the K-State College of Education to:

- a. Prepare pre-service and in-service school personnel to serve military-connected students and families;
- b. Meet the needs of our military-connected COE undergraduate and graduate students;
- c. Contribute to the knowledge base about education and military-connected students and families; and
- d. Collaborate with other military/veteran initiatives across campus.

Building Awareness College-Wide

In addition to the work being done in the teacher preparation program and the ongoing engagement of the adult education program with Fort Leavenworth, the college-wide steering committee, led by the co-authors of this paper, engaged the faculty by arranging several activities to build awareness and commitment across the college. The steering committee executed initial awareness activities to commence

in the fall of 2013 when students and faculty returned for the fall semester. College-level activities were planned for a fall kick-off to focus on military, veteran, and military-connected issues in education. The first event, in September, was the premier of the COE-developed documentary, *A Walk in My Shoes: Military Life* (<http://coe.ksu.edu/about/military/militarylife.html>), to over 400 students, faculty, military and community members. This documentary had been nine months in the making, with Risberg and Mercer providing leadership for the endeavor. In the documentary, seven people currently connected to the College of Education – retired soldiers, spouses, a child and educators – share their perspectives on the rewards and challenges of being connected to the military. Topics include the realities of deployments for the family and the soldier, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the social/emotional needs of military-connected children.

The committee arranged a resource fair in the lobby of Forum Hall for this event. In addition, the Midwest Equity Assistance Center (MEAC) sponsored a military-connected film festival and purchased and displayed books and curriculum materials related to the topic. The first showings for the film festival were Kevin Bacon's *Taking Chance*, and *Flat Daddy*, directed by Nara Barber and Betsy Nagler. Topical bulletin boards were designed on all floors of Bluemont Hall, the College of Education's home. A collection of books and videos regarding military families, deployment and trauma, and other issues were collected and placed in the COE media center and library for use by faculty, students and teachers. A brochure about the initiative was developed, and a webpage was designed (<http://www.coe.kstate.edu/about/military/index.html>).

Program and Research Initiatives

Sustainable programmatic initiatives began and are being continued within graduate and undergraduate programs in the college. In the teacher preparation program, the next steps were to start building a digital resource portfolio for our students and faculty to access, and to deliver workshops on the culture of the military family and the social emotional cycle that corresponds with the deployment cycle and how educators can help build resiliency in the classroom. The workshops were delivered in both our own classrooms of undergraduate and graduate education students as well as to multiple groups of K-12 faculty and staff in surrounding school districts. Risberg (2013) compiled information, workshops and training information into an interactive book, *Military Connected Students in the Classroom*. A Topics seminar course for student teachers, "Military Connected Students in the Classroom" is offered both fall and spring semesters. A videotaped "The Culture of the Military Child" workshop is available for instructors in the College of Education to use in their own courses.

At the graduate education level, Judy Hughey received competitive funding for "Engage, Collaborate and Counsel to Enhance Educational Capacity" for serving

military/veterans and their families. As part of this project, she is developing a Certificate of Competence in Counseling Military-connected Students for school counselors and candidates in counselor education graduate programs based on the theoretical and research framework and best practices in parent /family counseling, school consultation, and education strategies and interventions. The learning modules are being designed to prepare school counselors with skills to address the MCEC and ACCTE principles mentioned earlier.

To address the needs of military service personnel and their families while they are deployed, it is a national imperative to conduct research about the most effective ways to prepare educators and the most efficacious strategies for the educational success of military personnel, veterans, and military-connected children. College of Education faculty and graduate students are conducting important research that contributes to and informs the field of K-12 education, educational counseling, student affairs, educational leaders, and adult education (e.g. Sherbert, 2011; Gleiman and Swearingen, 2012; Clark, 2008; McClary, 2009). This research has been disseminated through national presentations at association and research conferences in an attempt to assist adult educators to better understand the military student (e.g. Curtis, 2013; Risberg, 2013a and 2013b; Thurston, Hughey, Risberg and Fishback, 2014). A research focus on the impact of combat stress on learning has attracted national attention from other universities who may partner with this research (Clark, 2014).

A major recent publication from the adult education faculty is an edited volume of *New Directions for Adult Education*. Faculty and student research from K-State is among the articles in J. Zacharakis & C. Polson (Eds.). (2012) *New directions for adult and continuing education, Vol. 136: Beyond training: The rise of adult education in the military*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Faculty in special education are researching the impact of multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) with military-connected students attending schools on military bases. Faculty in the teacher preparation program are conducting research on classroom strategies to build resilience and are investigating pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the needs of military-connected K-12 students. Other faculty and graduate students are conducting research to determine the understanding and perceptions of online and evening college instructors about military-connected learners; and others are studying the perceptions and knowledge about military learner issues among faculty in colleges of education.

Summary

Although we are pleased with the programs and research produced in K-State's College of Education as part of our military-connected students initiative, we believe this is just the beginning of the work to which we are committed. Graduate and undergraduate programs continue to build components related to military-connected

learners and conduct research that will impact our students as well as impact the work of other colleges of education across the country. Our work is presented at conferences, and in magazines and scholarly journals. A major event organized by faculty of the Colleges of Education and Human Ecology was the K-State Military Education and Family Initiatives Symposium that took place at Fort Riley, Kansas, and may become an annual event.

Military-connected students are found in every school district in the country. The new GI bill is providing opportunities for thousands of post 9/11 veterans and their dependents to attend our nation's colleges and universities. These students and their families bring both strengths and needs to K-12 and postsecondary classrooms.

The College of Education at K-State is committed to preparing our students and faculty to provide quality and relevant education for military personnel, veterans and their families. We understand this as part of our mission, to "prepare educators to be knowledgeable, ethical and caring decision makers for a diverse changing world." At its 2014 national conference in Washington, D.C., the Military Child Education Coalition announced that the College of Education as the recipient of the 2014 LTG (Ret.) H.G. "Pete" Taylor Higher Education Partnership of Excellence award in recognition of our work with school partners in educating military-connected students.

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