



2020
NASPA
SYMPOSIUM ON
MILITARY-CONNECTED
STUDENTS

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Talking Military in Higher Ed: Challenges and Opportunities
Communicating with Military
Dependents as Students

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What did you say?

What was said by a professor

- “The US is fighting in wars in the Middle East thought up by special interests over oil. No one in America cares about or even knows what we are fighting for.”

What a military-affiliated student hears

- My dad might die in a war that "no one cares about."



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I am... **RESILIENT** **WINNING**
COMMITTED
COURAGEOUS **STRONG**
ACCEPTING **PATIENT**
ADAPTABLE **SELF-STARTER** **DIVERSE**
EMPOWERED
UNDERSTANDING **INNOVATIVE**

Will your institution channel the strengths of military dependents or lose them in translation?



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Statistically Speaking: Military Families

- Spouses/dependents make up ~half of the military-connected population
- School-aged military children face a number of challenges
 - 4.8 million Americans part of an active-duty military family
 - 1.7 million children considered a dependent of active-duty military parent
 - 61% in active-duty military families that move frequently
 - 200,000 school-aged military youth move annually; average move 6-9 times from K-12

Statistically Speaking: Veterans

- **82% of veteran family members survey respondents believe the public does not understand the challenges service members face after ending military service**
- **Military family members who get or feel supported by their communities experience less deployment-related stress**
 - **Severe shortage of military and civilian mental health providers with expertise working with military families who are available to serve children and youth in military families**
- **48% of veterans do not feel they have a sense of belonging with their communities once they leave military service**
- **43% do not feel like they are part of the military community after leaving service**

Creating an Inclusive Campus Environment

- **Military dependents share a life experience, and communication styles, with their active-duty parents and/or spouses**
- **Growing up or living long-term in a military community is very different from the non-military environment, even if off-post/base**
- **Military-affiliated student education and programs on-campus often focus on veterans or active-duty**
- **Many military children pursue higher ed with complex financial, social, and academic pressures similar to those of first-gen students**
- **To better serve your military dependent sub-population, it is important to understand the wide range of challenges this group faces, and how they communicate in times of stress**



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Real-Life Story

Cassie said, “Senior year, I could tell that there was some bad news on the horizon coming from my dad...”



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Communication Styles

Style

Description

- **Passive**
 - Don't express feelings or needs/wants
 - Rely on others to make decisions to avoid conflict
 - Can lead to hidden anger, resentment, and miscommunication
- **Aggressive**
 - Expresses feelings, without regard for others' emotions/thoughts/feelings
 - Defensive when confronted by others
 - Can tend to hurt others or leave people out
- **Passive-Aggressive**
 - Appears passive, but subtly acting out anger
 - Uses indirect communication, sarcasm, or avoids conversations
 - Limited thinking about others' emotions
- **Assertive**
 - Direct and honest about thoughts and emotions
 - Respects others' feelings/needs but don't withhold their own
 - Can be misinterpreted as aggressive, especially in women

Group Exercise #1: First Impressions

- **Pair with another attendee**
 - **Person A: Faculty or Staff Member**
 - **Person B: Military Child attending University**
- **Read card with your assigned Communication Style**
- **Person A reads comment on card to Person B and Person B responds based on personal situation listed in card**
- **Continue conversation for 2 minutes**

The Military and Higher Ed

- **Academic**
 - History, Political Science, etc.
 - Seminars, research projects
- **Social/Community**
 - Political actions/protests
 - Groups, clubs, Greek system
- **Financial**
 - Resources available
 - Family income
- **Advising**
 - Mental Health
 - GPA and earned credits



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Resulting Communication Challenges

- **Balancing military and family obligations with work and school**
- **Military dependents are inclined to keep family information private**
 - They may not know when to ask for help because they are encouraged to be resilient and act as leaders
 - Stereotypes and conscious or unconscious bias of parents can cause conflict
 - They may not speak up when their feelings are hurt

Resulting Communication Challenges

- Military dependents might not think it is important/interesting to share military connection
- Misunderstanding from peers about the military community
- Lack of awareness of military family stress or mental health impacts can manifest as lack of empathy and even accusations of not fulfilling obligations
 - Bottled up anger or feelings of misunderstanding may manifest in grades or motivation to do work
 - Military community can reinforce the message that success comes from following rules and if you fail it is because you missed a step or did not do something that you were told to do

Group Exercise #2: Understanding Challenges

- **Persons A and B discuss one of the following topics with a selected Communication Style:**
 - Student struggling to understand GI Bill or in-state tuition access
 - Student becomes aware parent is deploying
 - Subject of current wars becomes contentious in a classroom setting
 - First-semester student struggling with transition from military community environment to campus life



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Simple Changes: Words Matter

- If they do not self-identify, ask, “Have you, a parent, or a spouse or partner ever served in the military?”
- Work with the student to create a path to career post-graduation (“What do you want to do with your degree?”)
- Suggest resources because they are part of a student’s tuition, not asking for help
 - “Have you visited the military-affiliated student center to learn about available benefits and scholarships?”
 - “Can we review all of the resources that are part of the tuition you pay every semester, like academic advising, the career center, tutoring, office hours, etc.?”
 - “Did you know that many organizations and departments on campus, and even your fellow students, can benefit from your leadership qualities?”



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Simple Changes: Creating an Inclusive Environment

- **Be mindful about stereotypes, generalizations and assumptions regarding student veterans, military students, and military family members**
 - **Combat experience, any challenges they may/may not face**
 - **Political beliefs, willingness and interest in discussing military service, etc.**
 - **Diversity of military service and environment, from race, gender, culture, background, education, etc.—just like the rest of America**
- **NEVER appropriate to ask student veterans or military family members if they or spouse or parent have killed someone**
 - **Faculty and staff should be ready to step in and shut down this query in a classroom (or anywhere) should it come up.**



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Simple Changes: Creating an Inclusive Environment

- When teaching military dependents, consider how facts or statements may be interpreted
- Understand that military family members may have unique challenges transitioning to the university from the military world
- Encourage faculty and staff to familiarize themselves with the military culture and important information for military-affiliated students
 - VA/TA Benefits
 - Tuition & residency
 - Deployment, PCS processes
 - Available Services, including mental health
- Encourage peer mentoring (formal and informal)



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Insights for Improvement

- **Demonstrate an understanding and be inclusive**
 - Offer inclusivity in messaging, programs, services
 - Integrate tailored support for spouses and dependents/parents in new student orientation
- **Ask students regarding military affiliation (appropriately)**
- **Provide strengths-based staff/faculty training/education regarding military-affiliated students, e.g., children and spouses**
- **Partner with military departments on campus to understand and meet needs of all military-affiliated students**



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Learning Objectives & Takeaways

- Consider the unique methods of communication within a military family and how learned modes of communication translate to a higher ed environment
- Understand findings of research regarding military dependents and communication skills/styles, as established within families developing within a military environment
- Review how communication styles established within military community can hamper effective communication university faculty and staff
- Through interactive communication exercise, demonstrate interpretation and misinterpretation of information based on roles of authority established by experience as a military dependent
- Share tools for faculty and staff to overcome challenges to and take advantage of opportunities for learning from this sub-population



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A Real-Life Story

Samantha in a First year, Gen-Ed requirement (History) during a discussion about ancient military funerals and how they honored the fallen, but also an opportunity to engage, reinvigorate soldiers towards the mission.



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Questions?


Feel free to contact us with any questions:

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