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# Partnering for a Seamless Transition to Higher Education: Lessons Learned<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

After the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Benefits were established in 2009, many organizations and higher education institutions asked how such investments could be used most effectively. Such questions were inspired by recognition of the transformational effects of the post-World War II GI Bill benefits that not only supported attendance at colleges and universities, but also refocused attention on access to and the benefits of higher education in America. Recent efforts to improve educational transition include the participants in the NSF project on veteran transition into the engineering and science fields that is the subject of this journal issue.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as increasing numbers of service members (SM) transitioned out of the military, multi-agency attention focused on how to make this process smoother for the SM and their families. In the state of Washington, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) began collaboration with Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) in 2010 to conduct a review of the transition process for service members in the state. Their review offered several recommendations (see Background section

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Dylan Medina for his research assistance on this project and his work on an internal report to Joint Base Lewis McChord from the University of Washington Tacoma research team. Lisa Hoffman, PhD was the PI on the program evaluation. Mr. Mark Brown, EdD candidate at UW Tacoma, is focusing his thesis on veteran transition into higher education and career training. He is a civilian employee at JBLM.

<sup>2</sup> See the report Veterans' Education for Engineering and Science: Report of the National Science Foundation Workshop on Enhancing the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Benefit, April 13, 2009 (<http://www.nsf.gov/eng/eec/VeteranEducation.pdf>).

below), including identifying individual plans and tasks in four transition tracks: employment, education, career/technical training, and small business/entrepreneurship. In the context of these and other efforts at JBLM, the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), the largest public university near JBLM, piloted a program of additional career and academic advising for those interested in the higher education track, and conducted an evaluation of this program.<sup>3</sup> The program, UW Tacoma at JBLM Armed Forces Career and Alumni Program (ACAP), consisted of access to a web-based career assessment tool (FOCUS-2), one-on-one career assessment advising, and one-on-one academic guidance for all public two- and four-year colleges and universities in the state of Washington. The program aim was to assist service members, regardless of the higher education institution they planned to attend, in finding the best higher education and career paths for them as individuals.

This paper discusses the findings of the program evaluation, with explicit consideration of wider government and community efforts at improving the transition process. We argue that such concurrently planned efforts underscore the critical importance of community partnerships between colleges, universities, military bases, and their surrounding stakeholders (for-profit and nonprofit) in these efforts. While there is special attention to the impact of partnerships between public higher education and military bases, understanding that these relationships are most effective when they include attention to employment and collaboration with additional partners is essential.

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<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 2013, UWT secured Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) research approval to conduct an evaluation of this program. This paper provides more detailed data from the June 2013-June 2014 formal program evaluation period and summarizes trends and conclusions from the January 2013 to June 2013 program activities, but does not include details about human subjects during this time. The program was first established in November of 2012, but transition services at the base were undergoing curricular and location changes that made the initial implementation of the program slow. We thus begin our summary from January 2013 and include human subject data from June 2013.

## BACKGROUND AND PLANNED CONCURRENT ACTIVITY IN SUPPORT OF THE PROJECT

Since September 11, 2001, the frequency and length of deployments of the U.S. military have increased dramatically. Research indicates that longer and more frequent deployments are predictors of greater psychological distress (Childers, 2014). The findings underscore the need for and importance of providing support services for returning veterans, especially those who were deployed to combat zones (Morin, 2011). More than 2.4 million military personnel have been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan or both theaters. Of that total, more than 1.3 million have since left the military and more than 710,000 have used VA health care between fiscal year 2002 and the third-quarter fiscal year 2011 (Collins et al. 2014).

According to the 2010 Census, just over 2.3 million people, less than one percent of the national population of 308 million, are currently serving in the U.S. military. At the same time, more than 22 million people, seven percent of the national population, are veterans who face a higher rate of unemployment than the national population (Cederholm, 2013). The unemployment rate of Gulf War-era II veterans of 6.9% exceeded the national average of 5.3% in December 2014

(<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t05.htm>).

The good news is that the rate is down from December 2013, 7.3% for Gulf War-era II veterans compared to 6.4% for nonveterans. The state of Washington, however, ranks in the top four states in the US for Army unemployment costs, highlighting the importance of collaborative attention to the transition process. At present, approximately 8,000 service members transition from active duty each year from Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) in Washington State, a figure that is

expected to continue through 2017.<sup>4</sup> These military personnel represent a diverse racial and ethnic population, with 36% minority male and female composition.<sup>5</sup>

There are several critical moments to note in governance of the transition process. In June 2010, JBLM asked the Washington State Department of Veteran Affairs (WDVA) to conduct a Lean Six Sigma (LSS) process improvement review of the military transition process. The results of this review were a comprehensive improvement plan and recommended process change.<sup>6</sup> The key components of the recommendations were:

- service members must start the process earlier (at least 12 months prior to separation);
- better preparation to enter civilian sector;
- networking;
- Individual Transition Plan (ITP) development (realistic options);
- service member empowerment, awareness and risk mitigation;
- timely decision-making (including reenlistment opportunities);

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<sup>4</sup> To help address these issues, Governor Inslee signed his first Executive order in office at JBLM on May 10th, 2013, Executive Order 13-01, Veterans, and State Employment (<http://www.governor.wa.gov/office/execorders/>), to help tackle transition issues. It requires each executive cabinet agency to develop a veteran employment plan to increase the representation of veterans in their workforce. Each agency must report progress as prescribed by the Office of the State Human Resources Director (OSHRD.) It augments a review of job applicants' qualifications to consider relevant equivalent experience obtained during military service. OSHRD assists staff and hiring managers to translate and credit military experience. OSHRD must collaborate with the Departments of Enterprise Services (DES), Employment Security (ESD), and Veterans Affairs (DVA), as well as other public and private partners to identify and develop veterans employment strategies and resources. It also established the Washington State Military Transition Council (WSMTC) (<http://www.dva.wa.gov/about-wdva/washington-state-military-transition-council-wsmtc>) which meets quarterly to coordinate transition assistance programs between Washington's military bases and other key stakeholders.

<sup>5</sup> Based on internal government data.

<sup>6</sup> This transition chart is available at <http://www-stage.dva.wa.gov/sites/default/files/WA%20State%20ACAP%20Transition%20Map%20-%20JUNE%202014.jpg>.

- replacement or elimination of long, static briefings with experiential, kinetic, one-on-one customer service that resonates with a 20-30 year old service member;
- reduce effects of service member unemployment claims (UCX) that impact DOD's budget;
- and increase command support.

Immediately following the JBLM review, the Vice Chief of Staff Army (VCSA) General Peter Chiarelli directed the Army G-1 to conduct a total review of the Army's transition process. A United States Military Academy (USMA) study group concurred with the JBLM improvement plan, identifying it as an Army best practice, and recommending Army-wide implementation. Concurrently, JBLM worked with Washington State Senator Murray's staff to highlight the shortcomings of ACAP, a system that had not been reviewed since its inception in 1992, when it was created to address military transition challenges for the post-Cold War/Gulf War-era. The creation of ACAP was a significant improvement over the existing Army Continuing Education System (ACES), created in 1973 to address the transition challenges post-Vietnam (Anderson & Kime, 1996).

The Veteran Opportunity to Work to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (VOW Act) was then passed as Public Law 112-56 (VOW To Hire Heroes Act 2011).<sup>7</sup> The VOW Act directed improvement of the DOD's Transition Assistance Program (TAP). It also made completion of TAP *mandatory* for transitioning service members, upgraded career counseling options and resume writing skills, and ensured that the program was tailored for the 21st century job market (Hodne, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel C, 2013). The VOW Act aimed to facilitate a seamless transition so that service members can begin the process prior to separation at jobs with VA, Homeland Security, and many other federal agencies. It expanded education and

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<sup>7</sup> This bill combined provisions of Senator Murray's Hiring Heroes Act (S. 951; Report #112-36), and Chairman Miller's Veterans Opportunity to Work Act (H.R. 2433; Report #112-242), and veterans' tax credits into a single package that targeted the high rate of veteran's unemployment (Weaver, 2013).

training, and provided additional benefits for unemployed and disabled veterans.<sup>8</sup> The VOW Act required the Department of Labor (DOL) to make military skills and training translatable into the civilian sector and simplify the process to obtain licenses and certifications. It also provided tax credits of up to \$5,600 for hiring veterans, and up to \$9,600 for hiring disabled veterans, if the veteran had been looking for work for six months or longer. These incentives are important as they have adjusted the landscape of transition for service members. It is in this context that the UWT pilot project was conceived and implemented.

Additionally, in December 2011, JBLM participated in the Army Transition Summit hosted by the VCSA, General Chiarelli at the Pentagon. The focused outcomes of the summit were: creation and implementation of a Department of the Army Execution Order (DA EXORD) for transition policy; evaluation and selection of a single portal technology application; revision of the TAP workshop; and identification of resource gaps to implement improved processes. In that same month, the DA EXORD was released with revised and expanded policy for transition services. The revision was based closely on the initial recommendations of the JBLM process improvement plan and the USMA study group, recognizing the innovations and partnerships put into place at this installation. The key components of revision included:

- initiation of transition process earlier (at least 12 months prior to separation instead of the previous requirement of 90 days);
- emphasis on command involvement and support;
- institution of measures of effectiveness tracked in the ACAP XXI software system;
- mandatory benefits enrollment for VA and DOL services;

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, unemployed veterans of past war eras were provided with up to one year of additional Montgomery GI Bill benefits to qualify for jobs in high-demand sectors. It also provided disabled veterans up to one year of additional vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits.

- initial counseling (ACAP) and development of the Individual Transition Plan (ITP);
- attendance at the VA Benefits Briefing and a resume for 100% of transitioning soldiers;
- and requirement for soldiers to register for eBENEFITS at (<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov>) and myHEALTHeVET at ([www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov)).

With the passage of The VOW Act in November 2011, and the subsequent passing of Public Law 112-56, the DOD and DHS gained authority to permit participation in apprenticeship programs for transitioning service members. We include a description of a successful apprenticeship program initiated at JBLM as an example of effective partnering for transition services. JBLM requested and received Staff Judge Advocate legal clearance to conduct apprenticeship programs. LTG Bromberg, Army G1, approved JBLM as a VIP pilot site. The Secretary of the Army convened an Apprenticeship Task Force to outline the path forward. The United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States, Canada and Australia (UA) (<http://uavip.org/>) piloted the concept at Camp Pendleton, California, Camp Murray, and JBLM to create the UA VIP Program that provides 18 weeks of accelerated welding and Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (HVAC/R) career and technical training. The training is free to transitioning service members who are placed in careers nationwide, replacing an aging workforce. Well-trained and highly-skilled welders and HVAC/R technicians are in high demand nationwide. The first JBLM accelerated welding class began in January 2013 at the UA Local 26 Training Facility in Lacey, Washington. Follow-on classes are every 20 weeks. Fort Carson, Colorado started the VIP program and a welding class commenced in October 2013. The UA expanded the VIP program to Fort Hood, Texas in February 2014. Fort Campbell, Kentucky is the next location for national expansion. The UA's welding and HVAC/R apprenticeship programs are certified for college credit with Washtenaw Community College, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ongoing college credit is earned by the apprentice throughout their career and fully funded

by the UA. Students attending the VIP program train for 18 weeks in order to earn six semester hours of college credit toward an Associate's degree, enter the UA's five-year apprenticeship program upon successful completion, and work in journey-level apprenticeship jobs, earning a living wage of salary and benefits. Entry-level apprentices can earn up to half of the living wage of journeypersons in their skilled trade for the geographic area. Following the completion of each year as a successful apprentice, salaries increase approximately 10% until journey-level wages are reached at the completion of the apprenticeship. The UA's apprenticeship appointments are eligible for GI Bill payment from the VA. The program received national recognition recently on NBC Nightly News

(<http://www.millerwelds.com/resources/articles/UA-Veterans-in-Piping-Program-VIP-Trains-Veterans/>).

JBLM started the Microsoft Software & Systems Academy (MSSA) in 2013, which consists of a 16-week course to obtain the certification required for technology careers such as a developer, applications engineer and IT project manager. Saint Martin's University delivers the content at JBLM during the duty day. The program will expand to other bases in the nation, starting with California and Texas. Active duty, National Guard and Reserves from all branches of the military are eligible for the academy

(<http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/press/2013/nov13/11-04softwaresystemsacademypr.aspx>).

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The pilot program offered by UWT at JBLM's ACAP must be understood in the context of these federal and DOD initiatives. In addition, it may be helpful to think of the services offered in terms of how a college student experiences "extra electives." The "required" coursework – coming out of the VOW Act requirements – consisted of more than five days of transition classes, including an intake process, an orientation session, classes from the Department of Labor, classes from the VA, and classes organized by their chosen track (Higher Education,

Career/Technical Training, Small Business / Entrepreneurship, and Standard Employment). Thus, any additional meetings with UWT staff were above an already demanding transition services schedule. Moreover, these UWT services and the surveys related to the program evaluation were all done on a voluntary basis. Both of these factors limited the number of service members who participated.

Conducting this program evaluation alerted us to additional valuable outcomes. In particular, we believe that there is significant value to having a higher education specialist in proximity to the TAP counselors, who are primarily DOD contract workers and often not long-term employees. This value is both because UWT placed a seasoned specialist in in the transition services center with deep and detailed knowledge of military transition/benefits and higher education in Washington, and because the service member sees evidence of partnership between his/her base and the higher education civilian community. Please see further discussion of key findings and recommendations below.

In this pilot program, UWT advisers made contact with transitioning service members in group sessions, through drop-ins, and in one-on-one appointments at ACAP. From January to June 2013, a general “career log” to assess plans was used, and then the service member was offered access to UWT’s FOCUS-2 web-based career assessment tool, as well as one-on-one follow up sessions to discuss the results. FOCUS-2 produces a personality and career profile of users and attempts to match them to potential career and education paths. For the academic services, the UWT staff used a general “higher education log” to assess the service member’s knowledge about higher education and funding resources. The service member was then offered general and one-to-one advising and discussions of educational pathways at all public 2- and 4-year institutions in the state. Information about how to fund their education was also provided in group and individual sessions.

### ENGAGING EXTRA SERVICES

If service members chose to participate in the pilot program (whether they were study participants or not), they were asked routine questions about their career and

higher education plans and goals. A number of participants also opted to start the FOCUS-2 assessment tool, but most did not complete it. Starting in June 2013, we began the formal program evaluation by recruiting voluntary study participants to take additional intake and exit surveys. Participants were divided into two subject groups – the advising group and the comparison group. The advising group refers to all study participants who met with UWT staff at ACAP and received career assessment advising and/or advising on any public higher education institution in the state of Washington. These study participants should have completed an intake survey and an exit survey upon completion of their interactions with UWT staff or their separation from the military. The comparison group refers to those who did NOT meet with any UWT staff and did not use any of the UWT services in ACAP. They completed one exit survey as they turned in their final paperwork and out-processed. Participation in both groups was entirely voluntary.

This report also includes summary information about the more informal and drop-in advising done consistently by the UWT staff. It is this more informal advising that seems to be the most beneficial and timely, as it takes place during the service member's initial orientation with their ACAP counselor.

### PROGRAM EVALUATION ADVISING GROUP

Forty-four people who met with UWT staff for services voluntarily became study participants, this is the advising group. All 44 study participants signed consent forms and completed intake surveys, but only 11 completed exit surveys. In the fall of 2014 we conducted follow-up outreach to secure exit surveys from those who had signed consent forms and indicated a willingness to be contacted. Only two individuals returned the exit surveys, increasing this to a total of 13. Another 11 surveys were returned, but they either did not sign consent forms or did not complete them properly. The data from those surveys are not included here. Overall these are very disappointing study numbers, which we believe is due to several factors outlined in this report (e.g., participation is voluntary).

General demographics for this group include: 82% male; average age of 37; 86% had at least one deployment; 54% were leaving because of retirement and 26% were transitioning because of ETS; 74% were currently married and 17% had never married; and just 14% had only a high school diploma or GED.

### PROGRAM EVALUATION COMPARISON GROUP

Thirty-eight people who never took advantage of UWT services in ACAP voluntarily completed our comparison group exit survey. They received a copy of the consent form with project information and are considered study participants. These surveys show an overall positive response to the information and guidance received in the ACAP transition process. For instance, in responding to the statement “before the ACAP transition process, I felt unclear about my career path after leaving the military,” 10 reported “neutral,” 6 reported “agree,” and 4 “reported strongly agree.” Yet in answering questions about feeling more prepared and aware after the transition process, the answers were strongly in favor of agreement. For example 12 reported “strongly agree” and 10 reported “agree” in regards to the statement “I have now identified skills from my military experience that can be applied to my career(s) of interest”; and 13 reported “strongly agree” and 8 reported “agree” in regards to the statement “I have now identified personal career goals.”

General demographics for this group include: 84% male and 16% female; average age was 29; 82% had at least one deployment; 55% were transitioning because of ETS; 58% were currently married and 24% had never married; and 10 individuals who reported having completed an ACAP track noted they started in a different track.

### THE VALUE OF INFORMAL COUNSELING AND A “WARM HAND-OVER”

The above numbers demonstrate that service members are not interested in taking surveys or completing career assessment tools that may be detailed and time-consuming unless they are required. Finally, there is a general reluctance to add

another scheduled class or appointment to a transition process that already demands over five days of their time. Nevertheless, the UWT advisory staff member noted that after having established a level of trust with the ACAP counselors, they would bring service members directly to her with higher education questions. The counselors would also stop in to talk with her about higher education. It is critical to note that this staff person was deliberately and well-trained to provide information about all public higher education institutions in the state while in this role. This program took this generalized and unbiased advising role very seriously. Because predatory practices by some educational entities and competition between higher education institutions serving veterans and military can be detrimental to the implementation of programs aimed at transition, this should be addressed in each community.

In order to try to quantify what seemed like a significant contribution to the transition process, the staff member recorded what she referred to as “drop-in” meetings with service members when she was able to provide significant information to them. For instance, in October and November 2013, 44 individuals met with the staff person in “drop-in” appointments; and in February, March, and April 2014, 54 drop-in appointments were recorded. The total for this time period (October 2013 to mid-July 2014) was 147 recorded meetings.

Additionally, the research team created a list of veteran center contacts at *all* public 2- and 4- year institutions of higher education in the state of Washington. The program staff used this regularly to provide what is termed a “warm hand-over” for the service member. Specifically, she gave the service member the name and contact information of individuals in the veteran service center and/or admissions office at the school. Research indicates that this kind of information and a “warm hand-over” and “mentor-based” process is especially effective for the veteran and military population.<sup>9</sup> It has been operationalized by the VA in states such as Minnesota as well

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<sup>9</sup> See Burnett and Segoria 2009; Anderson 2012; Green and Hayden 2013; Moon and Schma 2011.

(see: [http://www.mnveteransservice.org/documents/Veterans\\_Coordinators.html](http://www.mnveteransservice.org/documents/Veterans_Coordinators.html)).

Moreover, this kind of experience in the transition process helps to place the service member in a wider “community of care.” One study suggests practices of *listening* to the service members’ stories and experiences, and bringing in all relevant campus services (termed “everybody plays”) can be very effective in successful transition (Moon and Schma 2011).

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND BUILDING A “MODEL OF PARTNERSHIP”

While sample sizes are limited in all sections of this report, we argue here that patterns emerge that provide insights into the UWT program specifically, and may be generalizable to military transition more broadly. Moreover, we suggest there are key elements of this program that may provide a model of how large public universities should be partnering with regional military bases.

Key findings include:

- **Most service members reported having no prior career or education guidance.**<sup>10</sup> This guidance is crucial to facilitate transition because it helps service members become more aware of the potential paths they might take upon transitioning out of the service. This suggests that increased and earlier guidance could make the transition less abrupt.
- **Most service members indicated interest in educational pathways.** Research shows that in general a majority of service members entered the military, at least in part, for the education benefits (Taylor 2011). JBLM statistics indicate that upon transition, approximately 40% of service members enroll in full time education, and an additional 13% enroll in part time education while working a full or part time job. However, there is some question as to what education options they are aware of and what their goal is in pursuing higher education. It is clear that many of them see

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<sup>10</sup> This comes primarily from summaries by the program staff over the duration of the program, rather than the intake and exit surveys done by study participants.

higher education as a key to upward mobility. Offering proximate specialization in higher education during transition, as well as earlier higher education advising and enrollment opportunities, would be useful for service members.

- **Service members clearly gravitated toward group advising settings rather than one-on-one sessions.** An overemphasis on group classes was present both in the early phases of the UWT program and in ACAP more generally, with advising staff transitioning to more one-on-one appointments starting in the fall of 2013. More one-on-one and “buddy” advising and mentoring could be useful.
- Group classes are useful sites for collaboration, providing general information and a less intimidating environment. However, they often ignore the unique situation of each individual.
- One-on-one sessions are useful because they provide tailored information unique to the needs of the individual. Moreover, research has demonstrated that service members’ transitions happen more smoothly with one-on-one advising and mentoring (Johnson 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman and Mitchell 2008).
- A “buddy” system of 2 or 3 service members making appointments to discuss individual interests together may also be an effective form of advising and mentoring.
- **There is a sense that ACAP and the UWT Program operate in ways that may privilege particular paths and fields.** A general emphasis on “higher demand industries” and STEM fields may limit the options that service members would wish to consider. Tools such as FOCUS-2 could help service members. More individual or “buddy” advising, coupled with a mandatory career assessment tool, may be effective.
- **A “warm hand-over” from the transition process to higher education institutions may ease the transition for service members.** This requires keeping an updated list of individuals and contact information for the veteran and military service centers at all public higher education institutions in the state. Other innovative programs at JBLM, such as apprenticeship programs, offer a similar hand-over directly into the civilian

working world.<sup>11</sup> Similar to experiences of civilian first-generation college students, many service members are unfamiliar with higher education processes, terminology and culture (Anderson 2012). Continuing with this direct contact through the transition process should be useful.

## PART ONE: CAREER ASSESSMENT ADVISING

### *Discussion of Findings and Recommendations:*

A finding of this study is that service members are getting career assessment and advising only at the end of their service period. While a little bit of advising late is better than none at all, having advising *at the end of service* places a greater emphasis on *the break* than on the transition to the next phase, creating a feeling that the *distance* of the transition is extended. Additionally, service members facing transition likely have limited attention and time they can put toward the career assessments and advising.

**More frequent and earlier career advising** could help service members begin to think about what kinds of skills and experiences they gain in the military and how those skills might be re-contextualized to civilian settings. Paying attention to transition earlier will make it more gradual, allowing service members to feel that they can bring more of what they learned in the military with them.

The process of encountering a situation – such as separation from the military – that requires action and determination of effective strategies to respond is referred to as “uptake” in academic literature (Freadman 2002). Individuals assess the situation and select a response, based on memories of past similar experiences. If past transitions have had a positive impact on the individual, then they will “take up” this transition to civilian life in a more positive manner; the opposite may also be true. An individual may be unable to connect the present situation to anything in their memory, and thus, if they “take up” this unknown negatively, they may

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<sup>11</sup> See the following link for praise for this apprenticeship program:  
<http://www.dvidshub.net/news/137474/sma-chandler-blown-away-armys-job-placement-pilot-program#.U9Z64eNdV8>.

select strategies of avoidance and resistance. A Pew survey (Morin, 2011) in 2011 found that 44% of veterans who served since 9/11 had trouble adjusting to civilian life, underscoring the difficulty of this process (Collins et al. 2014).

This notion is also important because transition itself means movement from one context or social reality to another. Service member's memories – or knowledge of the rules – must be sufficiently generalized to be used to connect or explain the demands of the new context, otherwise he or she will struggle to select effective actions in the new context. In addition, the last major transition the service member experienced when he or she joined the military was a highly structured one. This is distinctly different from what is expected in the transition to civilian life, which emphasizes individuality and unique pathways. Providing a longer transition process may help create less of a break and more of a *transition*.

Academic writings about transitions from one social status to another also describe the transition itself as having a “liminal” period (Turner 1987). Liminality refers to a state of “in-between-ness” when one is moving from one status or identity (e.g., child) to another (e.g., adult). Rituals and rites of passage, such as graduation ceremonies, can be particularly important in marking the end of the liminal, or in-between, phase and celebrating the new identity. ACAP thus may be understood as a liminal phase of “in-between-ness” or transition from a military-dominant identity to a more civilian-dominant identity. Recognizing the refiguring of the self that takes place in this process and marking the completion of this transition with “graduation” events may be helpful for the service members.

#### *No previous career advising*

Career guidance is important, particularly for a transition that may be problematic for service members. Guidance is particularly crucial because it can help service members learn what is possible in civilian spaces and what kinds of pathways are available to them. However, a majority (76%) of those asked had never received career advising prior to this program. Similar proportions had never taken a career assessment (77%) or been to a career fair (72%). Of those who had received prior

career exploration services, females were slightly less likely to have taken a career assessment or been to a career fair.

The proportion of individuals who had never received previous career exploration services suggests that little attention is paid to transitioning into a civilian career until the end of an individual's term of service. Since concern for transition only becomes formalized when service members enter ACAP, there is a distinct divide between military and civilian experience. This sharp division may make the transition more distant, and may make it more difficult for service members to think about how their military experiences and skills can be modified and applied to civilian life.

### *Dominance of group advising*

A significant majority of service members who met with UWT advisors did so in group rather than individual sessions. This has much to do with the structure of the program that required service members to hear their presentations at the end of a regular session. Moreover, individual appointments required both additional personal time and attendance without peer support. While additional one-on-one advising sessions were not popular in general, it was even rarer for individuals to attend an individual session after attending a group session.

Yet, studies suggest that service members' transitions (e.g., into higher education settings) are best facilitated by one-on-one interaction with each individual (see Ackerman and DiRamio 2009). While group sessions are valuable against an alternative of little or no guidance, they do not adequately address individual needs and interests. It is possible that group settings include peer pressure to push people into a limited range of fields.

A "buddy" system of 2 to 3 service members attending individualized advising together may help provide tailored information and access the advantages noted in such an approach to transition. Individualized advice and guidance is clearly crucial for service members who likely only have a limited sense of what they are capable of doing in the civilian world. This is particularly true if they enlisted out of high

school or college. Having easy access to individualized advising, guidance, and mentoring is crucial to helping service members figure out how they will take what they have learned in the military and apply it to their path in the civilian sphere. Moreover, peer pressure associated with a group might push individuals into popular career paths that do not really interest them.

### *FOCUS-2 web-based career assessment tool*

The FOCUS-2 tool is a web-based personal, career, and education assessment tool. This tool consists of 14 sections with questionnaires that request users respond with a degree of interest in particular topics or activities. The tool provides personality, career, and education profiles that “fit” the individual. The second half of the program, which produces the career and educational profile, also generates a list of options for the user to browse. Completing all sections takes a good deal of time, particularly if the user is reading carefully and considering the options provided. Access to this tool was provided free of charge to JBLM service members going through ACAP as a part of this UWT program.

While this tool cannot approximate the responsiveness of quality one-on-one advising, it can produce a useful profile, particularly when coupled with individualized advising. The profile thus can be used to help direct the advising. The tool covers a broad range of topics and includes questions about one’s leisure interests as well. It also provides average salaries of careers and the rate of growth in a field. It does, however, privilege certain fields that are considered “high demand,” such as STEM fields.

### *FOCUS-2 participation and recommendations*

A total of 114 individuals from JBLM created FOCUS-2 accounts, with 90 created in 2013 and 24 created in 2014 through July 20. Only three people completed all sections of the questionnaire; 99 people started the questionnaire; 43 completed half (7) or more of the sections; and 15 individuals registered, but completed no sections. In the program evaluation study exit surveys, six individuals claimed to have completed the program (compared to administrative access to

FOCUS-2 that confirmed only three people had completed all sections). Of those six, three said it was helpful. Those who found it useful were either neutral or unclear about their path after separating from the military. Those who did not find it helpful were the least positive in terms of self-knowledge and two of them trended towards disagree and strongly disagree on the exit survey set questions. The negative responses may be related more to a general negative attitude about the transition process, rather than to a specific transition service. To assess if there are generalizable benefits from this tool, we suggest it be made mandatory. Mandatory completion of the tool would provide all service members going through ACAP with a detailed profile and extensive list of potential career and education paths that likely match fairly well their personal interests. It is clear that FOCUS-2 does not attract enough interest on its own. It is also clear that many individuals do not complete the assessment without encouragement. Making the tool mandatory is likely the most effective way to get service members to take advantage of such a resource.

## PART TWO: HIGHER EDUCATION ADVISING

### *Discussion of Findings and Recommendations:*

Based on this program evaluation and discussions with the advisors, this report concludes that there is strong interest in higher education among transitioning service members. JBLM statistics also indicate that upon transition, approximately 40% of service members enroll in full time education and an additional 13% enroll in part time education while working a full or part time job. For instance, based on data from the “logs,” 72% were considering either 4 year or graduate degrees, with an additional 23% considering 2 year degrees (both transferable and terminal). Of those interested in graduate work, approximately one quarter were interested in medicine and law. Additionally, 89% planned on using the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits; and of those who answered the questions, 63% knew about the higher education system in Washington; 26% said they did not know the difference between public and private for-profit institutions; and 32% did not know about the 2+2 transfer system in the state. This interest in higher education matches the 75% of post-9/11 veterans who claim that education benefits were a major reason for

joining the military (Taylor 2011). Moreover, after the Post-9/11 Bill Benefits were established, schools have predicted and seen rapidly increasing numbers of veterans and dependents enrolling in higher education.

In general, service members responded positively about the importance of higher education as a part of their pathway, and according to advising group exit survey, those considering further education felt well informed about admissions and financial aid procedures. This may reflect information gathered in the new higher education track classes as well.

### *Higher education and transition*

While the majority of those meeting with the program advisor had at least some college experience, the majority of it was from community and military colleges. Moreover, approximately half were choosing a field that was different from their military specialty. This is noteworthy and also suggests the importance of individualized, one-on-one advising rather than group advising sessions that may promote group think and peer pressure. To some extent, this could reflect a desire to try something new, which is a disposition useful for transitioning effectively because it allows individuals to try out the customs of new social contexts in the civilian sphere. While the exit survey data from the program evaluation study indicates service members feel they have learned valuable skills during their military careers, it is not entirely clear which skills they find most useful. When connected to the study released by the PEW Research Center (2011), this further emphasized the sense that service members overwhelmingly value their military experience but struggle to see exactly how that experience applies directly to future professions with the exception of skills such as work ethic and teamwork.

This evaluation also suggests that service members need to be well versed in the differences between higher education institutions so that they are able to make the transition from base-oriented schools to additional educational options in their communities. Considering the notion of “uptake,” service members with the tools to see similarities between their past and future higher education experiences should

experience more successful transitions. They will, however, need to understand the differences between community colleges, military colleges, baccalaureate institutions, and graduate schools. In addition, earlier emphasis on higher education, coupled with greater opportunities for enrollment, may decrease the feeling of “distance” in the transition to traditional colleges and universities.

### *Summary and Recommendations*

This study is a part of a longer tradition of studies of the military that help us to understand social changes in America. For instance, past studies have documented the impact of the post-WWII GI Bill benefits; shifting social mores with public attitudes towards the military during and after the Vietnam War; and questions of social mobility, especially for minorities, with the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) after the Vietnam War (M. A. Kleykamp, 2006).<sup>12</sup> Yet research on the military has been surprisingly limited since Vietnam, particularly in the past decade, except for a focus on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. The military remains a major institution in the lives of many young people, with roughly 200,000 new recruits entering the ranks each year (M. A. Kleykamp, 2006).

The academic advising provided by the UWT program at ACAP sought to orient service members to these issues and to find the best education pathway for them as individuals. Being able to navigate the various options available for higher education is a crucial part of transition. For instance, even though there is a strong interest in further education, few had taken the steps necessary to get their paperwork, such as past transcripts, in order. Although a significant number that had not yet requested them knew how to do so, most desired an unofficial review of their transcripts to help them understand what might be transferable to a BA. Additionally, similar to the career assessment advising experience, few had robust

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<sup>12</sup> Some argue this is true because military service offers both steady employment and numerous benefits such as the GI Bill (Kleykamp 2009). For example, Air Force training for enlisted personnel to prepare them for their technical specialties can be applied toward an associate’s degree through the Community College of the Air Force, which is an accredited degree-granting institution

advising histories. This suggests that earlier and holistic higher education advising for service members that includes information both about how to earn degrees while on active duty and how those options may change after transition (e.g., a focus on brick and mortar institutions in their communities) would be useful.

Partnership between a military installation and a higher education institution can support such advising. With significant interest in and financial support for higher education, robust guidance to service members is absolutely vital. In the dominant culture it is natural to see higher education as the path to career success, but this perspective is also challenged by mixed data on veteran success rates and student loan concerns. Finally, the “warm hand-over” that advisors in this program were able to provide to admissions and veteran center staff at all 2 and 4 year public institutions in the state is a valuable asset in this process. We suggest other states create up-to-date contact lists.

While data are limited in this study, several general conclusions may be drawn. It is clear that it is difficult to get service members to take advantage of additional advising and other services. There are likely a number of factors at work, including a lack of history with advising, an emphasis on this transition as a rupture or break rather than a transition, and limited ability to relate past experiences to the new civilian context.

Regarding “uptake,” understanding one’s situation and the rules in new settings requires a degree of self-knowledge and confidence, which may be enhanced with earlier and more robust career and academic advising. If memories suggest that moving into a new space will be interesting, challenging, and enjoyable, it is more likely the service member will be successful.

Movement from one context to a new context also clearly requires redefining one’s self and having a strong sense of how past skills and knowledge may be used and modified in the new setting. The general consensus is that no matter how we see transitions working, being aware of what is going on is a crucial component to transitioning successfully (Beach 2003; Devitt 2007; Nowacek 2011; Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom 2003). We also suggested the concept of liminality as a way to think

about the process of transition. Liminality refers to an in-between or liminal state as someone moves from one status or identity (e.g., military) to another (e.g., civilian), which often includes specific rites of passage. In using this concept, we suggested, for instance, providing group-based rites of passage that reference the camaraderie produced when one joins the military combined with one-on-one advising that addresses the specific concerns of each individual. Providing this continuous support as individuals gradually move through this liminal space between military and civilian settings could help develop smoother transition experiences. Earlier emphasis on how military experience (specific to specialty and generalized in terms of teamwork and leadership) can be modified or re-contextualized for civilian settings should also help with this process, emphasizing transition rather than rupture. Celebrating the transition formally may also help solidify the new civilian-oriented status.

Finally, we conclude that not much concern has been paid to transition prior to service members encounter with ACAP. Respondents in this report generally have some familiarity with the transition process including financial aid options, education options, and career options. Additionally, they are generally aware of what paperwork needs to be completed (e.g., collecting transcripts), but also generally have not completed such work. Concomitantly, many have not experienced career or academic assessment in the past. This suggests that service members are aware that the transition is coming, but have not done much to work on it by the time they reach ACAP.

If thought of transition occurs only at the very edge of each experience, it will appear more drastic when it is taken up. Much of the avoidance and lack of enthusiasm present in the data suggests that such a situation exists. Without question, new programs and classes put into place by ACAP in the past year have improved this greatly.

### *Building Partnerships*

Working across the fence of the military installation as partners to address issues related to veteran transition is essential for veterans' success. We believe this project and the recommendations listed below can be a model for other regions. Other key initiatives implemented by JBLM and UWT to support the transition process of service members include a job shadow program named Northwest Edge developed in partnership with Dylan Medina, from the University of Washington Seattle, and Hire America's Heroes (<http://hireamericasheroes.org/>). JBLM also works with several local private sector companies to expand our mentorship programs in cooperation with Boots to Shoes (<http://www.bootstoshoes.org/>). This regional community networking forum provides opportunities to connect veterans, transitioning service members, regional education institutions, and local Chambers of Commerce, Veteran Service Organizations, and community businesses. JBLM and UWT also work with local non-profits like Tacoma's Rally Point 6 (<http://rp6communitysitrep.blogspot.com/>) and grant-funded organizations like Camo to Commerce (<http://www.pacmtn.org/camo-2-commerce/>) to help transitioning service members.

Recommendations from this program evaluation:

- **Address the transition earlier and with greater resources;** service members will have the opportunity to begin to develop a higher level of awareness of their own experiences as well as the potential challenges of the transition.
- **Require career assessment and educational advising earlier;** service members may be unclear about the value of these activities. Earlier exposure will help familiarize them with these services and make separation less of a rupture and more of a transition.
- **Shift more emphasis to one-on-one and “buddy” advising, along with some group sessions;** while this requires more resources, a buddy system may make it easier for some service members to attend additional sessions.
- **Work to address the ideological forces that limit potential paths into civilian life;** service members will have a variety of interests ranging from

STEM fields to the Humanities to Business. All of these should be treated as viable options. Service members should feel free to explore fields that are outside of their military specialty.

- **Make a career assessment tool mandatory;** FOCUS-2 or other personality, career, and education assessment tool should be used completely.
- **Continue to establish partnerships among civilian, academic, and military institutions because they can do much to facilitate transition;** community partners will provide familiar channels through which service members can make their transitions. Partnerships will also make it easier for service members to gain a sense of how they will need to adapt. Non-military institutions learn to be more flexible and accepting of the efforts service members make. A good example is the scheduling of visits to schools and other relevant institutions by the higher education and career and technical tracks.

*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, DOD, or the U.S. Government.*

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