Building an Accelerated Online Graduate Program for Military Officers

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Abstract

Because of the intense and unique nature of their military life, military officers face stresses that other students do not need to be concerned about when taking courses online. An institution's ability to understand these military officer students, design online programs to meet their unique learning needs and deliver valuable online curricula to advance their learning is instrumental to the long-term success of both the military student and the institution. Reflecting on our more than twenty years of experience teaching and mentoring military officer students, this article tells the story behind the development of an accelerated online program and shares the challenges brought along with having military officers in our online classes, including unpredictable deployment schedules, unannounced military exercises, security concerns and military values and culture. How our faculty creatively and pedagogically addresses these issues while still maintaining the rigor of our academic program is also discussed.

Introduction

Background: Developing a Program for Military Officers

With the downsizing of the military and deployed troops returning from Afghanistan, higher education institutions will need to be better prepared to serve the military population. Military students create specific challenges for colleges and universities. An institution's ability to understand military students, design programs to meet their unique needs and deliver valuable curriculum is instrumental to long-term success.

While many authors have provided guidance and recommendations for better serving military students in general (e.g. Brown & Gross, 2011; Smucny & Stover, 2013), this paper focuses on better understanding a unique subset of online learners: military officers. Moreover, it focuses on military officers who are pursuing *graduate degrees* and describes a graduate program originally designed specifically for military officers, now offered in both face-to-face and online formats. To best serve military officers enrolled in online graduate programs, institutions and faculty members must understand the organizational culture in which these men and women operate and design programs that meet their needs and enhance their learning. Military officers may encounter unplanned deployment or training

exercises during online courses and often express concerns about security. Their extended service in the military results in deeply embedded norms, values and beliefs that can potentially impede learning. We offer practical advice for designing academic programs for military officers and enhancing learning by better understanding the culture of this unique group of graduate students.

Hamrick, Rumann, and Associates (2013) discussed the importance of university administrators and faculty understanding the intense nature of the military student's life. "The military activation timetable rarely matches neatly with the academic calendar and other institutional time markers" (Hamrick et al., 2013, p. 47). In addition to military schedules seldom aligning with higher education schedules and timelines, active military personnel who are pursuing graduate degrees have unique characteristics and challenges. For example, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics (Radford & Weko, 2011), military students pursuing graduate degrees in 2007-08 were different from their more traditional graduate student counterparts in several important ways. First, nearly 65% of military graduate students were male: 56% were married and 58% had at least one dependent. In comparison, only 40% of non-military graduate students were married and 32% had a dependent. Military graduate students were more likely than traditional graduate students to attend part-time, take a distance education course, and wait seven or more years after completing a bachelor's degree before beginning a master's degree (Radford & Weko, 2011).

Like other adult students, active duty military graduate students lead extremely busy lives. However, unlike most other graduate students, active duty military graduate students must deal with the added pressure of unexpected deployment or travel, especially if they are in a deployment cycle and intense levels of responsibility. Military officers, in particular, often have high levels of responsibility and may be under additional stress and pressure (Hamrick et al., 2013). Thus, working with high percentages of military officers presents added concerns and university administrators and faculty must develop carefully structured graduate programs to help these students achieve their goals of obtaining a master's degree.

Program Setting

A military post was located about 100 miles away from the main campus of a large public university in the Midwest. This particular post was aimed at intermediate level education for military officers. This post's main focus in the education of military officers consisted of a 10-month daytime program for mid-career officers. It is at this time in military officers' careers that many have the time to pursue a graduate degree, since their responsibilities are confined to regular educational activities and they are free from the stress of deployment or troop leadership. Be that as it may, the problem for the military officers is finding a higher education institution that will adjust their course times to meet the available time in their schedules. In the mid-1990s, the faculty at this university designed an adult education master's degree specifically to help military officers achieve a graduate degree while they participated in a 10-month advanced leader development assignment at a professional military education institution. The first step was redesigning traditional 15-week courses into a compressed 8-week delivery model. Next, coursework was delivered at the military site utilizing a cohort model that met one night per course each week for a four-hour period with supplemental online interaction during the week. Also, the professional military education institution was regionally accredited for graduate level education, so it allowed the faculty the opportunity to accept transfer credit from their day courses.

This compressed class format provided several advantages for military officers. First, it allowed participating officers to complete their required military leader development program during the day and attend a graduate course only one or two nights each week. Plus, it provided an opportunity for these officers to complete 2-4 courses in a traditional 15-week semester while only having to concentrate on 1 or 2 graduate courses at a time. Finally, it provided an opportunity to attend master's classes without

traveling off-site. This program design has been tremendously successful, and each year approximately 50 military officers choose to participate in this adult education graduate degree program. The vast majority of these officers complete their master's degree in conjunction with their 10-month assignment; some choose to complete their degree online during their next military assignment. In the 20 years this institution has been serving veterans and active duty military utilizing this 8-week model, over 600 military students have graduated from the program.

Desiring to provide opportunities for other servicemen and women to complete an adult education master's degree, the program was expanded to online delivery in 2010. These 8-week online courses mirror the face-to-face courses utilized in the prior cohort model for military officers. But, with online delivery there are added benefits. With new courses starting every eight weeks, military students have an opportunity to begin coursework at six different times throughout the year rather than having to start with the cohort group. Eight-week courses allow military officers to more easily make progress toward degree completion, even when deployment or periods of intense responsibility cause them to cease enrollment for short periods of time. With six different re-entry points in a calendar year, they can easily get back on track and enroll in a class when they are able without having to wait for the next semester. This online model has allowed active military students deployed to Afghanistan or stationed in places like Germany or Korea to enroll in courses and complete a graduate degree.

Like Hamrick and colleagues (2013), we have learned that making the transition from a highly structured military environment to a more loosely structured and self-directed approach in graduate education can be difficult for military students, in general, and even military officers. Navigating the often convoluted waters of application, enrollment, and financial aid processes in higher education can be challenging for any graduate student, but it can be particularly so for military officers who are not on campus and are accustomed to a much more linear process and action-related directives from superiors. While the courses in our master's degree program are structured in a pattern that allow military officers to easily see the path to a degree, the many offices at a university do not always align well, often creating confusion for off-campus students. Consequently, a coordinator position was created to work specifically with military officers seeking to enroll in the program, regardless of whether the student is in a cohort or an online program. This "one-stop-shop" provides an opportunity for military officers to have one point of contact for all university-related issues from application and enrollment procedures to financial aid to graduation. Videos and screenshots were created to walk military officers through the steps of the application and enrollment process in a more linear fashion, and the coordinator monitors various deadlines imposed by the institution and continually sends out emails and makes phone calls to assist military officers in completing time-sensitive tasks. This infrastructure simplifies processes for military officers and gives them one primary person to contact with all University-related questions and issues.

Investigation and Practice

The preceding sections provided important context regarding the design and evolution of an online accelerated degree program for military learner populations. The remaining sections focus on teaching and learning. As faculty members, we describe our experiences working with this unique population in an accelerated, online degree program and offer suggestions and best practices gleaned in over twenty years of teaching military officers and students. Where applicable, we provide specific examples to demonstrate challenges and potential methods of resolution to enhance learning for military students.

In many ways, our overall experiences serving military students (the vast majority of whom are officers) replicate what others have reported. These graduate students are typically highly motivated (Brown & Gross, 2011; Smucny & Stover, 2013; Starr-Glass, 2011), respectful (Smucny & Stover, 2013) and bring rich experiential learning experiences to the classroom (Starr-Glass, 2011). As military officers, they have leadership experience (Brown & Gross, 2011) and usually have records of high-level

responsibility and accountability (Starr-Glass, 2011). However, we have learned that one of the most critical aspects of working with military officers effectively and enhancing their learning is an understanding of military culture. Three aspects of military culture are particularly important to understand because they can affect online learning: deployment and military exercises, security issues and military ethos.

Deployment and Military Exercises

Military students, whether officers or enlisted, often encounter unpredictable deployment schedules and unannounced military exercises (Starr-Glass, 2011; Starr-Glass, 2013). An active duty military student may be suddenly deployed to a remote part of the world or be required to participate in a multi-day training exercise. In addition to disrupting the academic routine, these students may experience difficulty accessing online course materials due to intermittent Internet capability or limited computer access. Sometimes pre-recorded lectures stored on popular media sites like YouTube are even blocked by the local government, thus creating a learning barrier for these deployed military students. For example, in 2010, the South Korean government banned certain content on Twitter after the North Korean government opened a Twitter account. Our military students stationed in South Korea had difficulty participating in weekly Twitter learning activities required in a social media online course. More recently, online military students deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 could not access multimedia and learning materials on YouTube because of a government ban.

To address the various learning challenges created by unpredictable deployment schedules and unannounced military exercises, our faculty make every effort to be creative and flexible with their online instruction while still maintaining the rigor of our academic program. For example, our faculty (1) publish assignment due dates in different time zones so our military officer students living in different time zones are not confused with assignment due dates; (2) create different types of learning activities to address the learning outcomes so that our military officer students having difficulty completing certain learning activities can still participate in alternative learning activities to accomplish the same learning objectives; (3) extend assignment due dates on a case-by-case basis when an individual military officer student encounters intense stress due to a sudden deployment schedule or training change.

Faculty also take full advantage of modern technologies to present their course materials in different formats and through different media sites to address difficulty in accessing learning materials when being deployed to a remote part of the world. This enhances the probability of military officers being able to access course materials one way or another. Further, our faculty members are proactive rather than reactive when observing military officer students in our online classroom. Reaching out to officers to let them know we are aware of the issues created by the very nature of being a military officer and that we are equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources to address the issues they face to greatly reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1980, 1993; Moore & Kearlsey, 2005; Shearer, 2009), a key factor to successful online learning experience.

Security

Another unique aspect of military culture that can potentially impede learning is security. For active military personnel, security is one of the highest priorities of their day-to-day work. Unlike civilian students who can normally share anything they desire about their lives, jobs, and responsibilities, military students and especially military officers, have specific protocols regarding what they can share and through which media they can share. They are usually not allowed to share any details about what they do and those who are deployed cannot share their specific locations or anything about their combat operations. Military officers have completed Operations Security (OPSEC) training and as military leaders, they are highly aware of the potential ramifications from providing unnecessary information to

irrelevant parties and agencies. Therefore, military officers are typically very cautious in an online environment.

This culture of heightened, but necessary, security measures can potentially create at least two learning challenges for military students. First, military officers and students may be resistant to participate fully in online courses that require them to complete weekly learning activities on popular social media sites (i.e., wiki, blog, twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) because using these types of social media sites leaves a digital footprint on the Internet. Accidentally sharing information on these public sites that should not be shared could have serious and devastating consequences, so military students may resist participating altogether.

The next challenge sometimes associated with increased security issues arises in the ability to make solid and timely connections between the concepts covered in class and military students' daily jobs. Because our online adult education graduate program is practice-oriented, learning activities and assignments are designed to help students apply what they've learned to their day-to-day work. When military students are restricted from sharing certain information about what they do in the military, the resources they have from which to draw to demonstrate application or make connections are often limited. For example, in one online course, graduate students are asked to share with the class a case study on successful technology integration into adult learning. One military student struggled with this assignment because he was not allowed to publicly share his work as a training designer designing high technology simulation training programs for the military and he had no other experience outside the military setting from which to draw.

Our faculty help address security issues for online military students by providing multiple venues for military students to submit their assignments. In the example above, the instructor created a separate assignment drop box within the password-protected Learning Management System for this student to submit the project so only the instructor could review and evaluate it. To help address military student concerns about leaving digital footprints on social media sites, the instructor of our social media course does two things. First, he assigns readings on how the military benefits from the use of social media and develops use guidelines to help military students and their families use social media safely. Second, he encourages military officers and students to create and use a pseudonym on social media sites and avoid sharing any military-related information.

Military Ethos

Unplanned travel and security issues are aspects of military culture to which most graduate faculty can adapt fairly easily. However, facilitating learning within a deeply ingrained military ethos can be an underestimated cross-cultural problem for faculty. Because the majority of military students in our graduate program are mid-career officers, their personal identities are closely tied to the military. They have aligned themselves with the ethos and core values of the military and are comfortable with well-defined hierarchies (Smucny & Stover, 2013), rituals, symbols, and myths within the military (Starr-Glass, 2011).

Linear structures and chains of command serve military students well in their careers. An online class structure may present some initial awkwardness for military students as they leave their comfort zone. Experiencing multiple perspectives requires the development of a constructivist classroom in which the focus is on the adult learner's making of content. Being placed in a graduate learning situation within this framework often creates discomfort and imbalance for learners accustomed to more positivistic models. We have found that our military officer adult learners have a high level of critical analysis skills, but they employ these skills within a chain of command. Suddenly, when they find teachers serving as

constructivist facilitators asking what they think without the familiar military structure, it can be a jarring experience.

Another format concern for military officers who are used to a briefing style classroom is an online learning environment utilizing small group discussions in which students serve as facilitators, summarizers, and participants (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). In particular, online classrooms with students serving as question posers in control of their own learning changes traditional roles of student — teacher engagement and definitely runs counter to the hierarchical military structure to which our officers are accustomed. Instructors may be viewed as not doing a good job when deviating from a lecture-based, banking model approach. Explaining to military officers that this new online class format is similar to getting used to a new culture has been effective, as most of these graduate students have experienced multiple deployments to foreign countries.

Because we are familiar with the need to create cultural bridges, our faculty view student engagement as critical from the very beginning of an online course. Barkley (2010) defines student engagement as "a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning" (p. 8). In our online classes, engagement begins with student and faculty introductions, which specifically ask, among other areas such as hobbies, for students to address their connections to the military if they wish. These connections may involve their own service or a family member or friend's service. Faculty address military connections in introductions as well. These introductions provide initial connectors for student-student and student-faculty active learning. Perhaps more importantly, these introductions and military connections create a shared sense of knowing among military students and faculty that may contribute to the development of a sense of social belonging (Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009) and community (Song, Hill, Singleton, & Koh, 2004; Swan, 2002). A perceived sense of community can help create a cooperative, safe, and supportive place for online learners (Song et al., 2004; Swan, 2002). Establishing this safe and supportive sense of community early in an online course provides an environment in which active learning can take place and difficult concepts like taboo microaggressions (Sue, 2010) can be examined.

At times, this same safe and supportive space may contribute to "group think." Faculty must intentionally zero-in on military officers' "we are all green" perspective in which an exploration of diversity may be considered a barrier to military group cohesiveness. Our faculty believes the first step in addressing assumptions, attitudes and beliefs is to actively engaging military officers in meaningful discourse and reflection. We believe it imperative to find ways to foster critical analysis and critical reflection to broaden lenses and discourage assumptions. Besides being exposed to course content presented from multiple perspectives, military graduate students engaged in online courses also experience diverse views through interaction with civilian students. In fact, our military students repeatedly note their appreciation for civilian student – military student engagement. Social constructivist learning through active online methods such as group case study analysis in which teams generate one product provide student-generated and civilian-student and military-student sharing, which broadens perspectives and diminishes "group think" conclusions for all students.

In another example, the social foundations of adult education course content involves an in-depth examination of adult education and culture, which may question traditionally held militaristic beliefs about social issues like power and privilege. As Starr-Glass (2013) suggested, the strict hierarchical command structures and unidirectional authority, communication, and directives utilized and accepted in military culture legitimizes power and creates assumptions and attitudes that can be hard to change. One of the ways we try to continue to engage military students with challenging content and ease learner resistance is to emphasize connections to leadership. Military officers in our program specifically articulate the desire to integrate what they are learning into their leadership roles, which is a strong emphasis in current military training (Christen, Fall, & Kelly, 2011). Like other graduate students, our

military students often have specific personal and professional motivations for pursuing a graduate degree. Nonetheless, because a master's degree is often a pathway to promotion (Smucny & Stover, 2013; Starr-Glass, 2013) for military officers, we have found that clearly articulating connections between course content and leadership provides an initial building block from which military students can begin to construct new paradigms. These direct links to leadership, particularly as related to becoming a more effective leader of subordinates, creates a building block that then serves as a cornerstone for engagement.

Examples of student activities which connect to leadership and take on assumptions can be found in social foundations of adult education content. Military officers are asked to observe microaggressions, write their cultural story, and explore content to which most of them have not been exposed academically, such as feminist pedagogy, critical theory and social justice education. This course content is often unsettling and extremely difficult for military officers as these statements from end-of-program reflections demonstrate: "…The program forced me to learn about subjects that I was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with"; and "The Social Foundations course forced me to open my eyes, look at my own biases…."

Social foundations content involving issues of racism, sexism, power and privilege is difficult for many of our military officers and they sometimes struggle and become frustrated. All the same, helping military officers change myopic perspectives and see social concerns through multiple lenses is rewarding for faculty members and students. Artino (2009) found that frustration was found to be a positive predictor of metacognition with online military students and end-of-program reflections from our military officers regularly demonstrate enhanced awareness and broadened perspectives as outcomes of wrestling with difficult content, as reflected in the statements below:

- As I depart the program, my motivation has shifted from *me* to a collective *we*… Through the course of study, I began to look at the world through a different lens. The content was challenging because it caused my perspective to change. More accurately, my perspective matured. This was only possible after denying my comfortable myopic view of society through a distorted lens. Following self-reflection, my aperture began to increase and for the first time I could more fully appreciate other people's story.

- The biggest change I see, is my perspective. The method by which I examine issues, problems, and even possible solutions has changed due to my understanding of various perspectives.

- These classes always taught me something new or allowed me to gain a new point of view.

- It has helped me consider other points of view, beliefs, and opinions… This has led me to be less critical of other people who do not share the same perspective… This program exposed me to a larger population set who sees things much differently than me… Now, I am much more open to collaborating with, and listening to, those of different backgrounds. I genuinely value multiple perspectives after completing this program where I once refused to acknowledge alternate views.

- The biggest challenge was changing my lens.

- I have an appreciation of social issues and understanding the different lenses people see issues through will serve me well not only after the army, but through the rest of my career in the army.

Besides attaining an ability to consider multiple perspectives, military officers often report becoming more empathetic, a key leadership quality many articulate as desirable. As one military officer wrote, "I have empathy for other points of view." Another officer noted, "I have more effective ways to empathize with people and try to understand what motivates them." As faculty, we see the development

of empathy as a reciprocal process. We are obligated to look at inclusiveness and access through a military student lens in addition to the other diverse lenses through which we view access.

Analysis

The most obvious benefit of our accelerated master's degree program is the opportunity it provides military officers to complete their degrees whether they are stationed in the United States or deployed to another area of the world. Part of our success has been due to a university, college and department that are committed to serving this population. Likewise, experienced faculty members are invested in the program and have demonstrated a willingness to be innovative and experiment with new online teaching strategies to serve this population more effectively. They have worked to understand military culture and design online courses that address issues military students often face, all while maintaining a high level of academic rigor.

This commitment and willingness has resulted in positive word-of-mouth advertising from satisfied military officers. Instructionally, student reflections and end-of-program portfolio analyses suggest success in our goal of helping military officers think more critically, consider multiple perspectives on issues and become more empathetic leaders. The program has been oriented administratively and instructionally on this population of military officers and it has proven effective at meeting their complex needs both from a student support aspect and from an intellectual aspect. It is yet another example of the importance of understanding the culture and learning environment of a target student population and constructing a program that meets the corresponding needs. The program has continued to grow over time and this success has been a catalyst for the growth of the larger adult education program, thus providing more resources to continue to serve the military officer demographic that was the original target in the 1990s.

However, while we have experienced many benefits, it is important to note that accelerated degree programs possess inherent challenges for students and faculty. Because new courses start every eight weeks, students who get behind in course work due to deployment, connectivity issues, or life circumstances often struggle to catch up before the next course starts. An accelerated program format does not work for every learner and for some military officers the pace is just too fast. Likewise, faculty must adapt to a much faster pace than the traditional 15-week teaching model and learn how to maintain rigor while covering the same content in compressed schedule. Some faculty may resist this intense pace and the accelerated model, in general, or be unwilling to modify their online courses to better meet the needs of military students.

The year around scheduling of courses requires some adjustments in faculty and administrative practices. When other faculty are experiencing spring breaks or long holiday breaks, the faculty in this program are teaching courses. For instance, courses may begin in December and end in January or begin in early May and end late June. The coordinator position is paramount because this position must make sure that all the required hoops and deadlines of the university are met in their traditional 15-week schedule.

Recommendations

Military officers are a unique subset of online graduate students. Academic programs serving this military population must consider and try to understand the needs, values and culture of these students because they affect the students' interaction with the institution, the instructor, and fellow students. Programmatically, military officers benefit from a one-stop-shop approach with simple and

straightforward admission and enrollment policies and procedures. This minimizes frustration for military students and allows faculty time to focus on instruction.

For military officers and students, unplanned deployment or training exercises, an enhanced awareness of and concern about security, and distinct organizational values are deeply embedded norms. Unfortunately, many online faculty may not be aware of these organizational realities. Rather than assuming online faculty are aware of these intricacies and realities of military culture, institutions should discuss these issues with faculty and address ways of handling them effectively. Creating online faculty development modules might be one effective method of accomplishing this task. Additionally, online faculty must strive to develop connections and create a safe learning environment where prior beliefs and assumptions can be addressed and new perspectives can be constructed.

Finally, from an intellectual perspective, it is critical to create a program that will challenge the assumptions military officers carry with them and force them to grow intellectually. During a time when the army is reinvesting in education and stressing the need for critical and creative thinking, programs that concentrate on improving these important skills will help to prepare officers for success during their military career and after they leave the service. The ability to "think outside the box" or "create a totally new box" is at a premium in any leadership-based organization and it is especially important to the military as it moves into a period where it claims to be more focused on the human dimension of conflict. That the curriculum fosters the creation of these sorts of skills can be a lever to use in presenting the program to prospective students and any discussion held with military educational institutions about educational partnerships.

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