

Educational Opportunities Fuel Great Communities and a Strong Military

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Like many, those who serve want to make sure they and their families can be successful—and college is a big part of that. Whether it is making sure kids are ready for college, paying for it or getting the right degree to succeed after military service, educational opportunity is important to everyone.

It often is a factor in a family's decision to accept a duty station, or even depart military service. It is a big issue with a stealth impact on military readiness and an important issue for defense communities across the country. While many communities have different approaches to ensuring educational success for their military children and families, three of this year's Great American Defense Communities have innovative ideas for how to make it happen.

Tougher Classes Creating Positive Places to Explore the Future

Joint Base Charleston (S.C.) leadership has worked with local school districts to expand educational opportunities for military-connected students. One such program provides additional rigor with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education that can prepare students for success in college and careers. The National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) offers an innovative set of supports to increase access and participation in Advanced Placement (AP) high school classes.

"The National Math and Science Initiative is another step in Joint Base Charleston's effort toward creating a positive and strong learning environment for all children, including our military children, in the Charleston tri-county area," said Chris Gerry, School Liaison Officer, 628th Force Support Squadron.

By fall 2017, NMSI's College Readiness Program for Military Families will have been implemented in 215 military-connected high schools across 30 states, serving 89 installations.

"We were deployed to locations that were either considered really high-density or very high-need," said Marcus Lingenfelter, senior vice president for advancement at NMSI.

NMSI programming for military-connected schools originally was funded by grants from the Department of Defense Education Activity, Office of Naval Research and Army Education Opportunity Program, and most recently by Department of Defense STEM via the Air Force Academy Foundation. Private sector mission partners such as Northrop Grumman, The Boeing Company and BAE Systems, also have been invaluable by generously providing necessary matching funds. Such is the case with Joint Base Charleston and a \$1.4 million gift from Boeing.

NMSI provides overall capacity building interventions including educator professional development, student instructional supports and achievement-based financial awards to five schools in three different local county systems near Joint Base Charleston: Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester.

Given its proximity to Joint Base Charleston, Fort Dorchester High School's student body is very diverse. However, Principal Bert Postell noted that the school's AP program wasn't as inclusive or as strong as he would have liked.

"We were at a stage in the development of our Advanced Placement courses where we were trying to move from AP being for the elite group in the school and only certain students got to take these classes," Postell said.

To build instructional capacity, every AP teacher participates in summer NMSI training and two follow-up trainings during the school year. Students can participate in Saturday study sessions, when NMSI brings in subject matter experts to lead seminars.

After the first year, Fort Dorchester High School had a 157 percent increase in the number of students achieving a qualifying score on a math or science AP exam; for female students the increase was 185 percent and for minority students it was 125 percent. The initiative has a three-year implementation.

"NMSI has helped us grow our AP program," Postell said. "Just on numbers of students enrolled, we went from a little over 400 students in AP classes to last year, our first year in the NMSI program, where we gave more than 675 AP exams. We grew by about 200 students. This year, we're giving over 800 AP exams. Next year's enrollment in the same courses is up to about 1,000 students."

Fort Dorchester senior Jackson Trigiani has taken six AP classes through the program.

"Having that access has been beneficial to me, because AP classes have given me better college preparation. I have multiple college credits and I know that I can handle a tough course," he said. "I am two credits away from being a sophomore in college, and I haven't

even left my hometown. This is great, because I have time to explore and figure out things I would like to do in my future.”

Trigiani’s mother is a teacher at the high school, and his father, who is in the Army National Guard, has been deployed several times to Afghanistan. His most recent deployment was for one year as the commander of the South Carolina Army National Guard’s 251st Area Support Medical Company.

The 18-year-old says his teachers have created a positive environment for students.

“My teachers have encouraged me to think for myself and to ask questions,” he said. “One way my engineering teacher, Mr. Bertolet, does it to get us involved in the classroom. He makes participating fun by giving each student a task. The best classes let us learn who we are and how we think and respond to situations in an environment that makes it okay to make mistakes.”

What’s next for the senior? College. “I’m heading to University of South Carolina to study biomedical engineering.”

Preparing students for college and career success is the goal of the program, Postell said.

“We want our students to leave us college or career-ready, whichever is their chosen path. NMSI did a study of college freshmen, a student who has had an AP English and math course in high school, who did not pass the exam, still has a 0.5 higher GPA in college than the student who didn’t take the course,” Postell said.

And it’s not just students in the AP classes who benefit. Since all of Fort Dorchester’s educators teach AP and non-AP classes, through their professional development with NMSI, teachers have enhanced rigor and quality in instruction for all the school’s students.

For the families connected to Joint Base Charleston, the educational program is a great benefit of being in the area.

“Any program that improves school performance and academic achievement, such as the NMSI program, benefits military students,” Gerry said. “NMSI has increased collaboration between all of the participating schools, crossing district lines and attendance boundaries. Teachers are working together to improve instruction. This can only improve the quality in the educational systems our military children attend.”

Best of all, children feel excited to learn.

“In speaking with our local educators, they are seeing an improved desire by their students to achieve and be successful,” Gerry said. “Our educators are also seeing students who previously were intimidated by passing a placement class now rise to the challenge.”

Editor’s Note: The National Math and Science Initiative is a sponsor of the 2017 Great American Defense Communities program.



Since it opened in 1964, Cochise College in Sierra Vista, Ariz., has served the military community stationed at Fort Huachuca. Today, the student population is around 11,500.

Creating the Most Military-Friendly College in the Nation

As John Somers prepared to leave the Army after 20 years, he started to realize he didn’t know what to do next.

“I had been a military police officer, but going into law enforcement at the age of 40 really wasn’t going to work,” Somers said. “It was something that I physically didn’t have the ability to do. I had a ton of college credit, but I didn’t realize that college credits don’t equate to a degree. I didn’t know any of this.”

Fortunately, Somers was near Cochise College in Sierra Vista, Ariz., which has served the military community stationed at Fort Huachuca since it opened in the 1960s. The college has been named by GI Jobs Magazine and Victory Media as a top military-friendly school because of its military-focused services and academic programs.

Many soldiers receive extensive training at Fort Huachuca, which supports three of the Department of Defense’s fastest-growing missions: unmanned aircraft systems training

and operations, military intelligence, and cybersecurity. Through a unique partnership with Cochise College, soldiers can earn college credit for successful completion of this training, while also working toward an associate's degree.

The college awards credits based on soldiers' military occupation specialties (MOS) training experience. Students earn a grade point average and credit for each of their training courses, which they can apply toward a 64-credit associate degree of applied science. The college recognizes learning gained from specialized training and military experience in electronics technology, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operator and UAV technician programs. Cochise College is the first college or university in the nation to offer an MOS credentialing program.

"Over the last two years we've had over 1,800 student soldiers graduate from Cochise College with an associate of applied science degree. We are extremely proud of that," James Dale "J.D." Rottweiler, president of Cochise College, said.

The partnership with Fort Huachuca opens up opportunities for the college to help more soldiers even after they leave the installation.

"We have geared specific academic programs and career opportunities for soldiers to really begin their academic training while stationed at Fort Huachuca or some other location that is specific to those MOS and then we work to create completion programs so that student soldiers can complete their degrees wherever they might be stationed," Rottweiler said.

Cochise College works closely with Fort Huachuca's command leaders to build and refine its academic programs to meet soldiers' needs.

"We work to make sure our curriculum aligns and that we're doing things in partnership so that soldiers are getting their state-of-the-art training through the United States Army, the college is responding quickly to ensure that we're implementing that training directly into our degree," Rottweiler said.

Somers—the Army veteran who was unsure what to do when he was leaving the service—recalls what happened next for him.

"I spoke to an advisor who showed me how to get my military training evaluated, and I was put into a degree plan," Somers said. "They sent the degree plan to the military and they approved it. I was able to take classes at Cochise College. As I was completing my associate's degree, I was able to walk to Wayland Baptist University, enroll in the

bachelor's program, and graduate from there. All the classes were available right here on Fort Huachuca."

The advisor who got him on track worked in the Office of Extended Learning. Somers is now the director of that office.

Founded in 2003, the MOS credentialing program was started by a dean who was in the military himself and had been frustrated by how difficult it often was to receive credit for military training. Somers noted that for soldiers whose experience includes working with classified information they often leave service with little experience they can share on a resume. The MOS program helps to translate those achievements.

"In this community, a lot of the training is classified so the soldiers are never able to articulate what they were trained on. They leave the military and they're not able to say, 'I did this,'" Somers said. "Instead of going into the details of the information they were taught, we cover the methodology. Then we are able to award them a letter grade so they can actually get a GPA that they can take with them."

The college's on-post services are run out of the Education Center with a small staff. For deployed soldiers, Cochise College's Virtual Campus allows them to continue their education and earn an associate's degree online.

"In the Education Center at Fort Huachuca, we have academic advisors, we have counselors, and we're able to take any soldier who comes into the Ed Center and really address their needs depending on where they want to go—whether it's a more traditional tuition-assistance program or they are a permanent party stationed on Fort Huachuca and they want to continue a degree in something that may not be MOS-specific. We have all the resources there to handle that," Rottweiler said.

"Last year we had 630 students graduate with an associate's degree in applied science in intelligence operations," he said. "Those are graduates who were probably stationed at Fort Huachuca for their schoolhouse a year ago, two years ago, maybe even three years ago. [They] received credit for the training that that they received at Fort Huachuca at the time they were receiving it and then have chosen to complete their associate's degree and the other requirements either onsite or most likely through our fairly substantial virtual online campus that we set up so the soldiers can complete wherever they may be stationed."



An HH-60G Pave Hawk from the 55th Rescue Squadron orbits Fort Huachuca during an exercise on Dec 8, 2016. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airmen Chris Drzazgowski.

Redefining College Access and Affordability in Central Texas

Is it possible to earn a college degree for less than \$20,000 these days? For many military-connected students in Central Texas, the answer is yes.

Educators in the region have joined together in an innovative collaboration that provides access to quality public school programs, while also making higher education more convenient and affordable. This is no small achievement given the size of Fort Hood, the Army base in Killeen. With more than 214,000 acres, Fort Hood is the largest military base in the world by area, and the most populous U.S. military installation.

To meet the needs of such a large military population, Killeen Independent School District (KISD) has designed forward-thinking programs that engage and challenge students and prepare them for success in college and careers. The local community college, Central Texas College (CTC), and university, Texas A&M-Central Texas (TAMUCT), have aligned their programs to make it easier for active-duty soldiers, veterans and spouses to work toward an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree for less than \$20,000 in many cases. Together, this is making the region a desirable place for the military before and after service.

"This collaboration was a result of a need to create educational opportunities in the community closer to Fort Hood so that soldiers and their families could access them," said John Crutchfield, Greater Killeen Chamber of Commerce president and CEO. "What we've developed here is a model that pushes more kids through to successful completion at a much lower cost than is seen anywhere else around the state."

As early as high school, students can start earning college credit. All of KISD's high schools offer access to dual-credit classes, where students can earn college credits through CTC. Earning credits early offers a free way for students to start their higher education journey and learn how to handle the rigor of college-level coursework. These credits can be transferred to all of the Texas state universities and many public universities outside of the state as well. After high school, students easily can enroll at CTC. After earning an associate's degree, they then can enroll at TAMUCT to finish their bachelor's degree.

Overall, for a student who earns college credit during high school, an associate's degree at CTC and a bachelor's degree at TAMUCT, the cost is significantly lower than following the traditional high school to four-year university path. That's because TAMUCT was designed to work in partnership with CTC.

"Our approach starts by looking at three-year-olds through to the attainment of a master's degree or post-baccalaureate degree. What has come of the collaborative effort has been amazing opportunities for students. Working closely with CTC and Texas A&M—Central Texas, we have developed a degree plan that would allow students to attain a bachelor of science degree for around \$15,000–\$16,000, which is pretty phenomenal when you start looking at tuition fees across our state and around the nation," said John Craft, superintendent of KISD.

KISD students also can join the lottery for a coveted spot in the new Early College High School. This is the second year for the school, and demand and enthusiasm have been off the charts, according to KISD officials.

Early College students can earn a high school diploma and a 60-credit associate's degree during their four years. As freshmen, students focus on high school curricula courses. As sophomores, they take nine hours of college-level courses during the year. These classes are taught by CTC faculty and include speech, art and fine arts. KISD funds the entire program, including tuition at CTC, books and related fees.

Next year, the juniors will take their high school courses as well as 12 semester hours, each semester, of CTC courses. Junior and senior students will be housed on the CTC campus in a new building dedicated to retired Army Gen. Robert M. Shoemaker, who has been a champion for quality education in Central Texas.

"The benefit to the military and the military students is that if they go through this program and graduate with a high school diploma, they will also have two years of college behind them and they will have an associate's degree at no cost to them or their families. That's a huge benefit to military families, or any family really," said Jim Yeonopolus,

chancellor of CTC.

So far, the early results are good. According to data cited by program officials, to date, those attending the Early College High School program have scored much higher in standard testing when compared to their peers. What's also noteworthy, is that 75 percent of those in the program are the first in their families to attend college."

Just as the partnership among KISD, CTC, and TAMUCT provides opportunities to young students, it also helps active duty soldiers, veterans and military spouses by making the pathway from an associate's degree to a bachelor's degree seamless.

Andreina Reyes-Tome earned an associate's degree at CTC, and she now is a student at TAMUCT, where she is majoring in criminal justice and minoring in military science. Reyes-Tome is a veteran, having served in the Army for four-and-a-half years.

"Texas A&M has helped me in the transition. They really do take care of the veteran community and active duty community," said Reyes-Tome.

At TAMUCT, she is a contracted ROTC cadet. She also does work/study at the university's Ted and Diane Connell Military and Veteran Service Center, where she has the opportunity to assist fellow veterans in acclimating to the university community. She feels that because many of the faculty members and staff have prior military experience they understand the needs of military-affiliated students.

"The faculty members and staff are very welcoming and warm. A lot of them are prior military as well so I feel like I can relate to them. It's a close-knit environment," she said.

She feels that the university provides helpful support for veterans as well as soldiers who want to continue their studies while stationed elsewhere.

"It's very empowering. A lot of people who are transitioning out of the Army and want to pursue their education decide to come to Texas A&M," said Reyes-Tome. "If active-duty members have to do mandatory training or if they have to deploy they can take classes online. As far as I know, the faculty members have been very accommodating to their needs. From everybody that I've interacted with it's been a really enriching experience."

TAMUCT's leadership prides itself on creating a military-friendly culture for veterans such as Reyes-Tome.

"We have a very clear mission in serving military families and military personnel. It's been a part of our heritage, and it always will be," said Marc Nigliazzo, TAMUCT's president.

Since its founding, TAMUCT has focused on serving the military community. The university was founded in 2009 with 672 acres deeded from Fort Hood through the Department of the Army. Almost 49 percent of students are military-affiliated, and it has the second-largest student veteran population in the Texas A&M system.

“We try to do everything we can to make them feel welcome and to recognize the sacrifice they made in their service,” said Nigliazzo. “Our commitment to them has to be appropriate to the commitment they have made to us. That’s our driving force at the university.”

The collaboration among the three education systems is ongoing, and the leaders meet regularly in order to be intentional about their efforts and to align their programs to create viable pathways for students. They also conduct briefings with Fort Hood’s leadership and present at orientations for new brigade commanders, command sergeant majors and their spouses in order to increase awareness of their programs and to make sure that they are providing services that meet military families’ needs.

Working together, Central Texas schools are opening opportunities for members of the military and their families wherever their paths may lead.
