

Bridging Town Gown and Fatigue

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Flint Hills Region, Kansas

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In addition to being the home of the Big Red One (1st Infantry Division), the Flint Hills region of Kansas also is the home of the Wildcats of Kansas State University (K-State) in the town of Manhattan, about 15 miles from Fort Riley. For many years, meaningful interaction between the university and the Fort Riley Army installation was lacking. That was until about 10 years ago when the idea of a mutually beneficial partnership was born. The K-State – Fort Riley partnership was formalized in 2008, and it has continued to evolve.

“What is unique about our partnership is that we bring the whole of the university toward Fort Riley. It’s not just about looking at Fort Riley as a source of prospective students. It’s looking at it as a rich community, a diverse community,” said Art DeGroat, executive director of Military & Veterans Affairs at K-State. “You can’t find a piece of our university that’s not deeply engaged with the daily lives of Fort Riley’s soldiers or their families on or off duty.”

For K-State, a major objective of the partnership includes providing professional development to increase mission readiness. One example is the series of free cultural education events the university offers to Fort Riley soldiers.

“When Fort Riley has a unit that is preparing for overseas deployment, our university will find graduate students and professors and international students from the countries to which our soldiers will be deploying, and then we will host a series of cultural education and cultural training [events] above and beyond what the Army does to help prepare soldiers,” DeGroat said.

Additional services include offering transitioning military personnel access to career and employment services, providing access to athletic training facilities, and creating opportunities for military leaders to share their expertise with K-State faculty and students.

A perfect opportunity to share expertise occurred when Fort Riley became one of the first

units equipped with the new unmanned aerial systems. As it happens, K-State has the second-ranked unmanned aviation research and education program in the country. The partnership provided an incredible opportunity for teaching, learning and connecting in an authentic way.

Outreach to military families is another objective of the partnership. To help military families better integrate into the Flint Hills community, K-State creates special programs just for them through its Institute for the Health and Security of Military Families, created in 2009 for this purpose.

“The military families know very few people who are not in the Army with them. When they come to Fort Riley, they have a rare opportunity to really get to know and be part of the civilian community—many of these connections become life-long,” says DeGroat.

In addition, K-State has made serving military children a focus of its education school curriculum. “Every one of our education degree-seeking students is taking courses on understanding the unique needs of military children,” says DeGroat.

K-State’s work to serve military-connected youth attracted a visit from Dr. Jill Biden, second lady of the United States, in April. During her visit, Biden met with students and educators from K-State and Fort Riley Middle School. She praised the hard work of teachers in addressing the unique needs of military children.

Biden told The Topeka Capital-Journal, “I’m hoping it becomes part of our culture [that] all teachers all across the United States will make an effort to recognize military children and their challenges.” K-State’s graduates will be well-prepared for this effort.

To keep things fresh and energized, and to ensure that goals are properly aligned, the K-State president and the commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley evaluate and re-sign the partnership agreement annually.

The K-State–Fort Riley partnership is striving to build the most military-inclusive community in the nation. With a solid foundation in place, they’re on their way. – WS
