

More than a decade of combat has brought a sea of returning veterans, active and inactive duty members, and military spouses and families seeking or returning to higher education, in hopes of advancing military careers or developing skills that will ensure success in new fields. While their actual numbers have been difficult to pin down—partly because many veterans don't access the full range of educational benefits available to them—it's widely reported that far too few finish the degrees they set out for.

It's a worrying trend that has elicited criticism from policymakers, raised the eyebrows of taxpayers, and garnered significant attention in higher ed in recent years. For-profit institutions have been particularly scrutinized. According to a [March 2014 Inside Higher Ed article](#), which cites C.A. Cate's 2014 *Million Records Project: Research from Students Affairs of America*, for-profit institutions graduate the lowest number of military personnel of any post-secondary institutions by wide margins—anywhere from around 6%–20%.

Kaplan University has rolled up its sleeves to reverse that trend, and put military personnel and their families on the path to educational and career success; many even transcend their initial goals. As Scott Kilgore, Senior Vice President of Kaplan University Military Affairs recalls, "We were very familiar with the problems that the military was having. 92% of all enlisted personnel have no diploma when they enter the service—not even at the associate's level. Then most of them, at some point in time, go to school while they're in the service. Yet only 3% of them ever attain a degree by the time they leave service. So something is going wrong there."

The implications of military floundering in education are staggering in an economy that still struggles to gain speed. Kilgore explains, "It really came to a head for me when I [discovered] that the DOD paid over a billion dollars a year in unemployment. That's really what got me going, that we could be a part of the solution here."

Kilgore, a U.S. Army officer who served in command and staff positions in the Cavalry and Infantry branches, recognizes the unique barriers that can make degree completion a challenge for military personnel. One significant roadblock is simply time. In addition to the setbacks that occur when veterans must start and stop their education in between deployments, many recognize that the skills they're learning in the classroom are already far overshadowed by the skills and knowledge they've gained through military training and service. Military students become frustrated in the classroom when they feel they're duplicating efforts, costing them time and resources.

Kaplan has identified a strategy for applying those skills and experiences toward a degree. Through a process higher ed calls *articulation*, Kilgore and his Kaplan team

worked with interdisciplinary academic faculty to carefully evaluate the objectives of hundreds of courses, compared with the skills and knowledge developed in military training and combat, to determine exactly what could be substituted for college credit. For instance, combat arms or military police experience can be translated to college credit toward a degree in criminal justice, dramatically diminishing the number of credits needed to complete the degree; Kaplan offers a number of similar options meant to fast-track military personnel toward their educational and professional goals.

The first step is to help veterans themselves identify the kinds of skills their training and experience have already developed, and how that connects with their professional interests. As Kilgore notes, “Even a cook has been a leader.” For this, Kaplan offers a team of over 200 professionals across the country who work one on one with military personnel and their families to identify skills, experiences, and interests to get on the right path toward their Kaplan degree pursuits.

Kacy Webster, Campus President of Kaplan Des Moines elaborates, “Right from the very beginning [we assist] them with their career path and education; for example when they come in, we ask them, ‘what is your practical experience already?’ Then they are assigned a career services provider that is local, who then works with them throughout their entire program. We’ve got job shadowing and mentoring opportunities and are really trying to help them understand the market and what’s available to them.”

Military spouses and families—who often struggle to balance educational advancement, work, and family obligations while spouses and parents are deployed—also are eligible for programs, scholarships, and complex support systems through Kaplan University. Faculty and staff recognize the unique burdens military families experience, and seek to create the support networks to help them succeed. Webster explains, “We’re building that relationship with the spouse as well...I mean they’re Kaplan family if you will, as their spouse is active. At the Des Moines location, we have 99 current students that are either active or guard, who are getting those benefits. Just the amount of care that those spouses need, it’s a way for us to give back to them as well.”

It’s this long-range thinking and genuine commitment to military service members and their families that’s making Kaplan University the go-to institution for them to cultivate robust careers and successful families. Webster recalls one student who in his graduation speech cited the Kaplan support system as one reason for his success. “He said he showed his children that he was not only able to serve his country; he was able to get his degree through Kaplan University.”