

# The Role of Counselor Educators in Preparing Active Duty Military Students Utilizing Online Courses: An Initial Primer

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*Given today's diverse educational opportunities afforded through online courses, the implications for counselor educators working with active military students are examined. A literature review is presented summarizing current research addressing online education as well as meeting the specific needs of active duty military students. Suggested best practices for preparing these students to be competent counselors are presented, addressing their unique situations taking online courses while serving in active military roles. Recommendations for future research are also presented.*

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Historically, counselor education programs have been presented within traditional campus environments employing traditional pedagogical practices. However, today's online modalities offer an alternative for counselor training. In this article, we review the literature regarding the use of the Internet, online education and online counselor education. Special emphasis is given to training active duty military students in counseling specialties including: developing online communities, pedagogy, and proactive communication.

## **Global Internet Use and Online Education**

Distance education has evolved with the explosion of technology (Li & Irby, 2008). Previously, distance education entailed evening and night courses in a traditional classroom or correspondence courses via the mail. Although distance learning is hardly new, the Internet has emerged as a tool to address unmet demand for higher education not only in the United States but also globally (Campbell, 2008). According to Maples and Han (2008), in 2005 there were approximately one billion Internet users. The authors noted that Internet use in the United States ranked fifth (55.6%) in the world with Iceland and South Korea ranking first and second (67.5% and 61%, respectively). Globally the use of the Internet continues to expand.

As the accessibility of the Internet and the World Wide Web increases, more individuals are expected to pursue online education (Huett et al., 2008; Li & Irby, 2008). Cuellar (2002) defined an online course as “one that is taken through a Web-based learning platform using interactive teaching strategies...with students doing course work at a place and time convenient to the student” (p. 5).

More and more four-year institutions are offering online courses to students across the world (Campbell, 2008; Cuellar, 2002; Lyons, 2004). Lewis (2003) reported that online degree programs are offered in more than 75% of colleges and universities in the United States. Online courses are not only part of higher education degree programs but also high schools and adult learning programs (Goff-Kfour, 2006). Cuellar stated that the number of students taking online courses is expected to rise by 30% annually. With these numbers, it is important that counselor educators are prepared to effectively work online.

### ***Benefits of Online Education***

Online education offers an additional option for students who may not have access to traditional classrooms due to (a) living in geographically isolated areas, (b) being physically disabled or unable to leave home, and (c) having family or work constraints (Li & Irby, 2008; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). For example, students may pursue their education without taking a leave of absence from work (Goff-Kfour, 2006) or students may appreciate the convenience and flexibility of asynchronous learning.

Students have the opportunity to “shop around” for programs or schools that meet their needs without having to consider distance or availability. This is beneficial for students looking for universities with specific programs or with a particular language, religious or ethnic foci (Centore & Milacci, 2008). Li and Irby (2008) noted that the flexibility of online education provides a time-independent and place-independent educational environment which may address the needs of individuals from different backgrounds and age ranges. The use of multi-media to create instructional materials is reported to be a significant benefit to online education (Jerry & Collins, 2005; Li & Irby, 2008). Videos, animation, and interactive simulations create interactive learning between teacher and student.

Other benefits include access to the course and course materials 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Coleman, 2005; Li & Irby, 2008). This allows students flexibility in when they do their coursework. Online education is also advantageous to students because even if teachers are not available 24 hours a day, e-mail gives the perception that instructors are available to the student. Coleman (2005) noted the online environment makes teachers seem more approachable via online chats, e-mail, and discussions without the constraint of office hours. She further stated that students may not be impacted by biases caused by seating arrangement, gender, race or ethnicity and age.

Coleman (2005) pointed out the following benefits of online learning or education:

1. Each student is required to participate in classroom discussions that increase the diversity of opinion.
2. Online instructors may be from any location in the world that allows students to be exposed to practical knowledge that cannot be learned from books.
3. Online educational tools teach skills in using technologies that will be essential to working with colleagues globally and across time zones.
4. The use of “chat rooms” and newsgroups may not only facilitate team learning but also eliminate scheduling problems and finding meeting locations.

### ***Limitations of Online Education***

Similar to cybercounseling, online education is limited to students who are able to access and use the Internet (Maples & Han, 2008). Online learning requires that students possess the necessary skills to use e-mail and the Internet. Another drawback to online learning is technological challenges or failures. Both the teacher and student are responsible for overcoming technology literacy challenges. Students may not have Internet access because of various reasons such as power failure, computer mishaps, or inconsistent Internet service. Students may not be motivated to do their coursework (Goff-Kfour, 2006). For example, students may feel isolated due to the lack of required face-to-face interaction or perceived accountability. Day to day demands may interfere with students keeping up with assignments and coursework due dates. The authors recognize that some of these limitations may also be seen in a traditional classroom setting, but wanted to distinguish limitations to online learning.

### **Online Learning and Counselor Education**

As online educational programs become more prolific, online counselor training programs will likely continue to reflect this growth. Both traditional universities and online universities are offering more and more opportunities for online counselor training. Currently, there are four masters programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and one CACREP accredited doctoral program available online in the United States (CACREP, 2009). Since the 1990's opportunities for the use of distance education and technology in counselor training have been explored. Casey, Bloom and Moan (1994) found that the use of computers and related hardware and software provided cutting-edge possibilities for effective counselor training. Christie (2001) reported that in a counselor training program that a high percentage of students believed that the use of email facilitated learning and made their professor more accessible.

Training counselors in an online environment offers special challenges. In addition to the content knowledge necessary, it is important for counseling students to be able to demonstrate an acquisition of specific skills. Relationship building skills, counseling intervention skills, goal setting

and assessment skills, and working from an inclusive and multicultural framework are all necessary components of training. In addition, other aspects of counselor training such as pre-practicum, practicum, internship, taping, and supervision, must be taken into account when delivering counselor training in an online environment. The authors' institution staff and faculty members works to meet all of the above stated objectives, and to do so for a diverse population of counseling students, including military students.

### **Online Pedagogy and Counselor Education**

As with traditional pedagogy, it is important for online counselor training programs to strive to create a culture of support, positive communication, commitment, and engagement. Many of the suggested teaching approaches for online training, for example, emulate good counselor training practice. Students in an online training environment need to feel a level of emotional involvement in their courses, and to feel that they are truly supported and "special" in the eyes of their instructor (Hall, 2002). Similarly, Jerry and Collins (2005) found that instructors who focus on online community development including focusing on the emotional needs of the online community as a whole were more successful. This philosophy of teaching is consistent with important tenets of counselor training. Online counseling programs should be competency-based and include web-based instruction as well as face-to-face counseling skills training and applications that emphasize skill acquisition and development (Jerry & Collins).

A common question pertaining to online counselor training is, "how can the program facilitate the acquisition of clinical skills?" At the authors' institution, counseling students are exposed to video examples of counseling, written scenarios of counseling situations, and opportunities to share and discuss strategies and techniques in online courses. During face to face pre-practicum experiences, students engage with faculty and other students in role playing individual and group counseling experiences including taping and feedback. During practicum and internship, students experience real-time weekly supervision with their university supervisor in an organized phone group format, and weekly individual supervision from their site supervisor. A challenge of online counselor training programs is to identify experiences that emulate the traditional university experience.

Clinical supervision, for example, is an area of interest in online counselor training. In a CACREP accredited program, group supervision must occur for an average of one and one-half hours per week (CACREP, 2009). Interestingly, Coker, Jones, Staples and Harbach (2002) found that masters' students in a CACREP accredited masters program who received both face-to-face supervision and online supervision with a text-chat and video modality found the online supervision amenable to constructive and positive supervision interactions. Results of a study by Christie (2001) indicated that electronic group conferencing during supervision allowed for engagement in reflective processing, complex case conceptualization, and peer supervision. It seems that online pedagogy has found the means to effectively deliver high quality content for counselor development and education.

The nature of online learning is attractive to students who, for a variety of reasons, may not have access to traditional counselor training. Members of our armed forces and their families, for example, are often in situations where they either cannot be in one place long enough to complete a graduate program or are overseas where there is limited access to graduate training programs. Online counselor training is one way to assist those students.

## **Military Educational History**

The Servicemember's Adjustment Act of 1944 is considered one of the most significant pieces of legislation affecting veterans (Veteran's Administration [VA], 2008). Also known as the GI Bill this piece of legislation was in effect from 1944 until 1956. The purpose of the GI Bill was to provide educational benefits for veterans returning home. Over 16 million World War II veterans were eligible to receive benefits from the GI Bill. With a total participation of 7.8 million the GI Bill allowed for 2.2 million veterans to pursue higher education degrees while 3.5 million attended technical schools (McMurray, 2007). Additionally, 700,000 veterans participated in educational programming related to agriculture. Immediately following World War II, veterans utilizing the GI Bill accounted for 49% of all students enrolled in college. The GI Bill was potentially established to make amends for the veterans of World War I who were released from active duty following the war with only sixty dollars and a bus ticket home.

Following the end of the GI Bill in 1956 there was a lack of financial support from the military to support higher education. In 1984 a new GI Bill was adopted by the VA (Veteran's Administration [VA], 2008). This GI Bill became known as the Montgomery GI Bill being named after its' sponsor Gillespie Montgomery, a congressman from Mississippi. This newer version of the GI Bill remained in effect until 2008 when it was again revamped to allow for an enhancement of educational benefits. Historically, all versions of the GI Bill have offered financial assistance for educational pursuits and a monetary allotment for books. The latest GI Bill also provides for a transfer of benefits from the soldier to either a spouse or a child of the veteran.

### **Military Students and Online Education**

At no other time in history has such an opportunity for higher education existed for military personnel. McMurray (2007) discussed the opportunities that exist on military installations around the world and in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Today's educational opportunities are available in a variety of mediums to include correspondence courses, online courses, and other potential technologies which may be on the developmental horizon (McMurray).

One educational program which has prospered in the contemporary military setting has been the eArmyU commonly referred to as the Army University Access Online (McMurray, 2007). Through the web portal for this program soldiers are provided the opportunity to complete an admission application, register for courses, and to complete coursework. Soldiers enrolled through eArmyU have the opportunity to acquire a program certification, an associate's degree, bachelor's degree, or a master's degree. Eskey (2002) indicated that as early as 2002 over 12,000 soldier students were participating in the eArmyU program. Currently, over 1,000 degrees are offered via the eArmyU portal at several accredited universities. Another very successful academic venture for the military has been the Community College of the Air Force offering Associate level degrees through a variety of technology milieus since 1972 (Pluviose, 2007). Both non-profit and for profit higher educational institutions are recruiting soldier students.

### ***Similarities to Non-Military Students***

Similar to non-military students military soldier students look to online learning because there are advantages and conveniences such as the ability to work full-time and go to school. Additional similarities may include academic skills, technical skills, and time and support for studies just to name a few (Muilenburg & Zane, 2005). Carnevale (2006) suggested that technology increases accessibility for military personnel and under served populations. Additionally, soldier students are similar to non-military students regarding motivation and a willingness to succeed. Many soldier learners are young, ambitious, and mirror other students taking the same course work.

### ***Unique Military Student Needs***

What separates military learners from the rest of the academic community is the responsibility of being a soldier student. Being deployed and experiencing an interruption in one's studies provides increased challenges. Student soldiers may be given a choice between sending an email home or briefly logging into a course room to post a discussion or answer a question (Carnevale, 2006). McMurray (2007) indicated that serving effectively can be difficult when a student is concerned about classes or having to study. Military learners have higher attrition rates than other learners possibly as a result of this stress. Soldier learners are often exposed to physical stress, emotional distress, and could be potentially affected by PTSD or other mental health concerns (McMurray).

The need to complete clinical requirements may be another important concern facing soldier students. Clinical requirements are often needed in fields such as counseling and psychology as well as the ability to meet with particular client populations on a regular basis. An example would be a student who needs to complete a practicum or internship with a specified number of contact hours and or setting requirements (i.e., one-on-one or group counseling). As a result of these necessities Carnevale (2006) suggested such requirements may negatively impact the pursuit of an online degree for active duty soldiers. Another potential difficulty exists if the format of a course is synchronous, requiring the soldier learner to participate in time-sensitive meetings versus being asynchronous and not



requiring a time-specific meeting. For example, it may be 3:00 a.m. when a soldier student is required to be online due to time zone differences and overseas deployment. Recognition of some of the unique military student needs is addressed in the discussion below.

## Best Practices

Best practices for online counselor education are presented with specific considerations for military learners identified. The following areas will be addressed: 1) developing online communities; 2) pedagogy; and 3) proactive communication.

### *Developing Online Communities*

To establish and foster online communities instructors need to develop supportive atmospheres. Not only does this aid every student in feeling connected and “heard” but this can be especially important for military students. There are several ways online communities can be developed:

- Open the class with a non-threatening, fun, and useful introduction for the students to respond to. For example: *Imagine you were stranded on an island and could only bring one movie to watch and one former instructor. Explain why you chose the movie and what makes an instructor “companion worthy.”* These questions can lead to discussions about personality characteristics as well as thoughts about what makes for a positive instructor/learning experience.
- Encourage discussions pertaining to real-world experiences. For example, engage students in a conversation about maintaining personal life stressors separate from the professional role as a therapist. Ask students to identify current life situations that may influence their work with clients and how they can manage these influences. You may use active military duty as an example to generate ideas from students.
- Provide an online space for conversations that do not directly correlate to the course. Sometimes areas can be called “café” or “break room” in which students and faculty can promote an interactive area. For example, the instructor can scan and post cartoons that may be relevant to the profession or an upcoming

holiday. These spaces allow students to engage in conversations about their personal lives, such as having babies or getting married, that provide another dimension to the online environment. “Cafés” can also provide relief for military students to share what they are currently experiencing, such as moving overseas.

## ***Pedagogy***

Meyers (2008) found that a transformative pedagogical perspective may be effective in online teaching. The author noted, “Transformative pedagogy assumes that students are active learners in the classroom; professors frequently use strategies such as collaborative learning, problem-based instruction, discussions, or role plays to promote engagement” (p.221). Meyers suggested: analyzing case studies, listening to audio-streamed radio diaries that describe diverse cases, and utilizing asynchronous discussion boards to facilitate debates.

The following best practices were suggested for effective online pedagogy (Meyers, 2008): (a) create a safe and inviting environment; (b) encourage students to think about their experiences, beliefs, and biases; (c) use teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation; (d) pose real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and (e) help students implement action-oriented solutions (p. 220).

The final suggestion may be specifically applied to online military learners. While implementing transformative pedagogy, online course rooms are positioned well to allow students to feel empowered to effect social change. Students who have military experience may have extensive global understanding for how different cultures may approach societal challenges and change. Discussions can be encouraged to incorporate this real-world experience to develop greater know-how in order to take action-steps towards current counseling causes. For example, a spin-off from a discussion about different cultures effecting change may lead students to contact their state representatives regarding social advocacy issues. Weaving together the unique experiences of military learners with ways that counseling students can implement social action is one way to directly apply transformative pedagogy to online learning and military students.

## ***Proactive Communication***

Eskey (2002) indicated that for soldier students to be successful that a good relationship must be formed with the course instructor. It may be essential for the instructor to provide flexibility while still providing important and competent instruction. To encourage military learner completion, instructors may need to take a more active communication role to aid these learners in obtaining academic success. These measures, although important for all students, may be especially pertinent when working with military learners to encourage their persistence and course completion. Proactive communication can be accomplished:

- Establish a strong presence in the class room. This can be achieved by providing prompt responses to student emails and posts. The authors suggest a turn-around time of 24 hours for emails and 78 hours for discussions. Additionally, provide timely feedback on assignments to increase student engagement and interest in coursework. This can be accomplished by providing unique written feedback within one week for assignments.
- Engage students in a private conversation the first week of class if it seems they may not be successful. Taking the time to connect with your students at the beginning of a course allows them the opportunity to commit to being actively participatory in the course. The authors have experienced students who are truly appreciative of this extra communication and “instructor belief” that they can be successful. An example of an email message is: *As your instructor, I noticed that you haven't been “present” in the classroom. This is an exciting course and I would like to hear about your life experiences and how they tie into this week's discussion. I hope that everything is okay but if not, please let me know. I imagine you truly want to achieve your educational goals so I look forward to hearing back from you.* By quickly touching base with the students via an email, you can establish that you care about their success and believe they can do it. This extra personal communication has brought students “back” into some of our online courses.
- Announce course requirements or updates in several places. Although many students have unlimited online access, military students may only have a few minutes to complete their work. A

simple way to encourage their success is to post messages both as an email and in the discussion areas. If students only have time to log into one area, they can obtain the necessary information without being penalized for missing out on the instructor's carefully crafted communication. In an online setting, redundancy can be a positive proactive communication technique.

## **Discussion and Research Recommendations**

Online learning offers educational opportunities for a multitude of students. As the Internet and World Wide Web continue to become more common, counselor educators need to be prepared to meet the demands of online teaching. This can be accomplished by understanding the keys to establishing online communities, utilizing appropriate pedagogy and proactively communicating with students.

Specific techniques have been provided to augment online teaching strategies to address the unique needs of military learners. Some of the suggested best practices include: providing non-threatening introductions, using real-world applications, using casual café spaces, leading students to take social action, being available to students in a timely manner, encouraging learners from the beginning that they can accomplish their goals, and effectively using redundancy within the course room. Not only will these methods address the needs of military students but they may also enhance the experiences of all counseling students.

It is important to note that although an exhaustive search of professional literature to address the needs of military learners was performed, the paucity of research became apparent. Unfortunately, although online education provides a unique solution for active duty military learners, very little is known about specific needs and strategies that may be helpful. The authors used their collective experience to establish this initial primer but also recognize the need for further study. Qualitative research would be useful in establishing a core set of guidelines for counselor educators. Additionally, the specific needs of active duty war zone military service students are unknown at this time. This information would enhance our professional literature base. In conclusion, the authors call for the need to research the intricacies of military student life in order to more fully meet the needs of this unique group of learners.

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